

Delayed Coming Out in Older Adults: The Influence of Compulsory Heterosexuality among LGBP Individuals

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Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences of older LGBP individuals in India who came out later in life, with a specific focus on the role of compulsory heterosexuality. The research draws on in-depth interviews with 12 self-identified queer individuals aged 30 and above. Six interrelated themes emerged: Internalization of Heteronormativity, Cultural and Familial Pressures, Psychological Toll of Delayed Coming Out, The Journey to Self-Recognition, Navigating Social Stigma and Ageism, and Reimagining the Future. These themes reveal how heteronormative structures and expectations deeply shaped participants' early identities and delayed their self-disclosure. The analysis, grounded in Adrienne Rich's framework of compulsory heterosexuality, highlights the tension between imposed social roles and authentic selfhood. Despite years of silence and repression, participants described powerful journeys toward self-recognition, queer joy, and hope. This study offers critical insights into how queerness is negotiated across the life course and calls for more inclusive mental health support, visibility, and community engagement for older LGBTQ+ individuals in the Indian context.

Keywords: Delayed Coming Out, Compulsory Heterosexuality, Queer Aging, Heteronormativity, Late-Life Disclosure, Internalized Homophobia, Coming Out Narratives

1. Introduction

The journey of coming out as LGBTQ+ is deeply personal and shaped by a variety of social, cultural, and temporal factors. While much research has explored the experiences of individuals who come out during adolescence or early adulthood, less attention has been paid to those who delay this process until later in life. This phenomenon, although less visible in mainstream discourse, is significant and warrants exploration, especially in light of how societal norms, internalized stigma, and life stage dynamics intersect to shape identity disclosure.

A central concept informing this study is compulsory heterosexuality, a term popularized by Adrienne Rich (1980), which describes the societal expectation that heterosexuality is the default and desirable norm. This ideology operates pervasively, often silencing or invalidating non-heteronormative identities. For many older LGBTQ+ individuals, growing up under the influence of rigid gender norms, institutionalized homophobia, and limited visibility of queer lives contributed to their delayed self-recognition and disclosure.

Additionally, the framework of internalized homophobia, which refers to the inward adoption of society's negative attitudes toward homosexuality, further complicates the coming out process. For some, these

internalized beliefs can persist well into adulthood, influencing emotional wellbeing, relationships, and identity development. When layered with age-specific concerns such as familial responsibility, fear of late-life isolation, and changes in social roles, the coming out process for older adults takes on unique dimensions.

This research seeks to explore the lived experiences of older LGBTQ+ individuals who came out later in life. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study aims to uncover how participants make sense of their delayed coming out journeys, and how their narratives are shaped by the interplay of personal and societal forces.

1.1. Compulsory Heterosexuality and Social Norms

Adrienne Rich's (1980) notion of compulsory heterosexuality underscores the pervasive expectation that heterosexuality is natural and inevitable. This assumption often marginalizes and silences queer identities, particularly during formative years. Older LGBTQ+ individuals frequently grew up in eras where visibility was scarce and heteronormativity was deeply entrenched, shaping their early perceptions of what was acceptable and possible.

1.2. Internalized Homophobia and Psychological Impact

Building on this, internalized homophobia, defined by Herek (2004) as the internalization of society's negative attitudes toward non-heterosexual identities, can delay self-acceptance and disclosure. For older adults, such internalized stigma may have developed over decades, further compounding feelings of shame, fear, or guilt. These psychological burdens often delay the coming out process and contribute to mental health challenges.

1.3. LGBTQ+ Ageing and Identity Development

The ageing process introduces additional complexities to LGBTQ+ identity development. Studies by Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2011) highlight that older LGBTQ+ individuals often face dual marginalization: ageism within broader society and heteronormativity within ageing services. Furthermore, unlike their younger counterparts, older individuals may have fewer peer support networks, greater fear of rejection from adult children, and a heightened sense of social isolation.

1.4 Delayed Coming Out: An Underexplored Phenomenon

Despite increasing interest in queer ageing, the specific phenomenon of delayed coming out remains underexplored. While some studies (e.g., Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Barker et al., 2012) touch upon late-life disclosure, few examine the psychological and socio-cultural narratives that shape these experiences. This gap presents an opportunity to deepen our understanding of how identity, time, and culture intersect in unique ways for those who come out later in life.

This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the intersecting forces of compulsory heterosexuality and generational marginalization that inform the delayed coming out experiences of older LGBTQ+ individuals. By foregrounding their narratives, the research aims not only to disrupt the youth-centric orientation of LGBTQ+ scholarship but also to expand our understanding of queer temporality, resilience, and identity formation across the life course.

2. Methodology

2.1. Statement of purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual individuals in India who came out after the age of thirty. It seeks to understand how they navigate their identities within familial, cultural, and societal contexts, and how media representations of queerness have

shaped or challenged their self-perception. By centering voices often excluded from dominant queer narratives, this study aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of queer identity in the Indian context.

2.2. Research Question

1. What social and cultural barriers, stemming from compulsory heterosexuality, contribute to delayed coming out among older adults?
2. What are the psychological effects of delayed coming out due to compulsory heterosexuality on older LGBTQ+ individuals?

2.3. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of queer individuals in India who came out after the age of 30. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of personal narratives and the sociocultural factors influencing identity and disclosure.

2.4. Sampling

The study population consisted of 12 cis-gendered individuals aged 30-50 who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Pansexual. The participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling.

Inclusion criteria: self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or pansexual (LGBP); came out after age 30; currently reside in India.

Exclusion criteria: heterosexual or asexual individuals; LGBP individuals who came out before age 30.

2.5. Data Collection

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share personal stories while enabling deeper probing. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

2.6. Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step process. No software was used; the analysis was conducted manually for close engagement with the data.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of anonymity, and were informed that audio recordings would be deleted after transcription. Transcripts were sent to the participants for review before analysis. All data was used solely for academic purposes.

3. Results

Table 1. Showing the demographic details of the participants

Participant	Age	Age of coming out	Gender	Sexual Orientation
P1	46	41	Female	Lesbian
P2	35	30	Female	Lesbian
P3	43	36	Male	Gay
P4	32	32	Male	Gay
P5	36	31	Male	Bisexual
P6	50	50	Male	Bisexual

P7	36	35	Female	Pansexual
P8	32	32	Female	Pansexual
P9	48	47	Male	Pansexual
P10	43	41	Male	Pansexual
P11	52	51	Female	Bisexual
P12	37	37	Female	Bisexual

This study sought to explore how compulsory heterosexuality contributes to delayed coming out among older LGBTQ+ individuals, and the psychological impact of such delay. Through Braun and Clarke's analysis framework (2006), six major themes and their related sub themes emerged. These reflect the complex, layered experiences of participants navigating identity, cultural norms, and personal liberation later in life.

3.1. Internalization of Heteronormativity

Subthemes: Silencing of Desire, Performative Heterosexuality, Fear of Deviance

Rooted in Adrienne Rich's (1980) theory of compulsory heterosexuality, this theme reflects how participants absorbed societal expectations that erased or delegitimize same-sex desire.

- Silencing of Desire refers to the suppression of non-heterosexual feelings, often experienced as confusion or shame. As Participant 10 shared, *"I didn't even realise there was a name for how I felt till I was 40."*
- Performative Heterosexuality captures the enactment of heterosexual roles, such as marrying a man or having children, to conform to societal norms. Participant 7 said, *"I kept thinking, once I get married, maybe I'll change."*
- Fear of Deviance describes the dread of being labeled as abnormal or immoral due to one's authentic identity. As Participant 5 described, *"Being different was scary... like, what would people say?"*

These narratives echo Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity and the psychological burden of living a life inauthentic to one's true self.

3.2. Cultural and Familial Pressures

Subthemes: Marriage as a Social Obligation, Gendered Expectations, Intergenerational Silence

Family and cultural expectations exerted strong control over identity expression.

- Marriage as a Social Obligation reflects how heterosexual marriage is perceived as a duty to one's family and community. Participant 7 stated, *"My parents were relieved when I agreed to marry. They didn't know it felt like a death sentence to me."*
- Gendered Expectations encompasses the rigid roles imposed on individuals based on gender. Participant 8 explained, *"In our home, women were expected to be quiet, obedient, and above all, straight."*
- Intergenerational Silence refers to the lack of dialogue about sexuality. As Participant 4 said, *"I never saw anyone like me growing up. I thought maybe I was the only one."*

These findings resonate with Kole's (2007) work on queer erasure within Indian cultural frameworks and

Choudhury's (2017) research on gendered roles.

3.3. Psychological Toll of Delayed Coming Out

Subthemes: Chronic Anxiety and Depression, Loss of Time, Identity Fragmentation

Participants shared deep emotional consequences resulting from prolonged suppression.

- Chronic Anxiety and Depression was frequently mentioned, as Participant 3 reflected, *"I used to cry myself to sleep, thinking I was broken."*
- Loss of Time refers to mourning a life lived under constraint. Participant 9 shared, *"I look back and feel like I lost the best years of my life pretending."*
- Identity Fragmentation involved leading dual lives. Participant 7 stated, *"There was the me at home, the me at work, and the real me, locked away."*

These reflections align with Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Theory, where sustained concealment of identity results in adverse mental health outcomes.

3.4. The Journey to Self-Recognition

Subthemes: Catalyst Moments, Reclaiming Language, Sense of Relief and Belonging

Participants described pivotal moments of realization and the slow process of self-acceptance.

- Catalyst Moments included therapy or encountering queer representation. Participant 2 shared, *"It wasn't until I saw a movie with two women in love that something clicked."*
- Reclaiming Language allowed participants to name their experiences. Participant 1 stated, *"The word 'lesbian' felt scary at first... now it feels like home."*
- Sense of Relief and Belonging followed disclosure. Participant 2 reflected, *"Telling my sister was terrifying, but when she hugged me, I felt like I could finally exhale."*

This theme echoes Sedgwick's (1990) emphasis on the power of language and recognition in queer identity formation.

3.5. Navigating Social Stigma and Ageism

Subthemes: Fear of Being "Too Old" to Start Over, Invisibility in LGBTQ+ Spaces, Stigma Management

Participants noted unique challenges tied to age.

- Fear of Being "Too Old" to Start Over was evident in Participant 12's words: *"Sometimes I wonder if I missed my chance at love."*
- Invisibility in LGBTQ+ Spaces captured feelings of exclusion. Participant 11 said, *"When I walk into a queer event, I feel invisible. Like they only see the young ones."*
- Stigma Management included humor and secrecy. Participant 9 joked, *"I came out at 47, better late than never, right?"* but later admitted the fear that preceded it.

These insights mirror Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco's (2010) work on aging and marginalization in LGBTQ+ communities.

3.6. Reimagining the Future

Subthemes: Hope and Empowerment Post-Coming Out, Creating Chosen Families, Activism and Advocacy

Despite hardships, participants expressed hope.

- Hope and Empowerment Post-Coming Out was voiced by Participant 5: *"Coming out felt like a rebirth. I'm not wasting another minute."*
- Creating Chosen Families included forming supportive bonds. Participant 11 shared, *"My queer friends became my family, the ones who really saw me."*
- Activism and Advocacy became a form of healing. Participant 1 stated, *"I speak at community events*

now. If I can help someone come out sooner, it's worth it."

These narratives embody Halberstam's (2005) notion of queer temporality, suggesting that the path to selfhood doesn't follow a single timeline, and that healing and joy are possible at any age.

4. Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the pervasive impact of compulsory heterosexuality on the lives of older LGBP adults, shaping both their internal landscapes and external choices. As conceptualized by Rich (1980), compulsory heterosexuality functions not merely as a dominant sexual orientation norm but as a cultural institution that coerces individuals, particularly those assigned female at birth, into heterosexual roles and identities. This was evident in participants' early life decisions, such as entering heterosexual marriages, suppressing same-sex desires, and adhering to rigid gender expectations, often at the expense of personal authenticity.

One of the most significant effects of this systemic norm was the internalization of heteronormativity, where participants absorbed societal messages that heterosexuality was natural and any deviation was deviant. This aligns with Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, wherein participants enacted socially sanctioned gender and sexual roles to gain acceptance or avoid scrutiny. The long-term psychological consequences, ranging from anxiety and depression to feelings of fragmentation, echo the tenets of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), emphasizing the mental health toll of concealing one's identity in a heteronormative environment.

Cultural and familial expectations were also deeply intertwined with compulsory heterosexuality. Particularly within Indian sociocultural contexts, marriage and gender conformity are often non-negotiable norms (Kole, 2007). Participants reported that silence around sexuality and the absence of visible queer role models further reinforced the idea that heterosexuality was the only viable path, resulting in decades of identity suppression.

However, the process of coming out later in life was often catalyzed by exposure to queer language, media representation, or affirming relationships. These moments offered participants a chance to reframe their delayed coming out not as failure but as a journey toward self-truth. The capacity to reclaim agency, despite years of suppression, supports Halberstam's (2005) notion of queer temporality, which challenges linear life narratives and validates alternative life courses.

Notably, even post-coming out, participants navigated ageism and invisibility within LGBTQ+ spaces, highlighting the intersectional pressures older queer adults face. These insights suggest that interventions must move beyond simple visibility campaigns to include intergenerational support, culturally specific education, and affirming mental health services for older LGBP individuals.

In sum, compulsory heterosexuality not only delayed the recognition and expression of queer identities but also shaped the emotional landscapes of entire lifespans. Yet, the resilience and agency demonstrated by participants affirm that meaningful identity reclamation is possible at any age.

4.1 Implications

The findings from this study have several important implications for practice, policy, and future research. First, they underscore the urgent need for culturally competent mental health services that recognize the long-term psychological impact of identity suppression in older LGBP individuals. Mental health professionals must be trained to support clients who come out later in life, acknowledging the grief, trauma, and resilience embedded in their journeys.

Second, there is a pressing need to disrupt heteronormative assumptions within familial, educational, and

social institutions, particularly in collectivist and patriarchal contexts. Public health initiatives should work to normalize diverse sexual identities across the lifespan, fostering environments where individuals do not feel pressured into heterosexual roles from a young age.

Third, LGBTQ+ advocacy spaces must be more inclusive of older queer voices. Many participants in this study reported feeling invisible or excluded from mainstream LGBTQ+ narratives that prioritize youth and coming out early. Programs that foster intergenerational dialogue and create community for older queer adults can help mitigate this exclusion.

Finally, these findings call for further research on queer aging, especially within non-Western contexts, highlighting how intersecting systems like ageism, patriarchy, and cultural silence shape sexual identity development. Longitudinal studies that follow LGBP individuals across different life stages would provide more insight into evolving identity processes.

4.2 Limitations

This study, while offering in-depth insights into the lived experiences of older LGBP adults who came out later in life, is subject to several limitations. First, the use of a small, purposive sample, characteristic of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), supports rich, detailed analysis but limits the generalizability of the findings to wider LGBP populations (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Second, the sample lacked diversity in terms of gender identity and cultural background. Most participants identified as cisgender and were from relatively similar sociocultural contexts. As a result, the study may not reflect the unique experiences of transgender, non-binary, or gender-diverse individuals, or those from rural, lower socioeconomic, or conservative religious environments, where compulsory heterosexuality may be enacted and experienced differently (Kole, 2007).

Third, the data relied on retrospective self-reporting, which can introduce recall bias and emotional reinterpretation of past events (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants' reflections on earlier life stages are inevitably shaped by their current understanding and emotional positioning.

Fourth, the study focused on individuals who had already come out and were engaged in some form of queer community or support system. This focus may have excluded narratives of those who remain closeted, those ambivalent about their identity, or those who faced severe consequences from coming out. These missing voices could offer critical perspectives on the broader impact of compulsory heterosexuality.

Finally, the potential for social desirability bias should be noted. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the topic, participants may have consciously or unconsciously shaped their narratives to align with socially acceptable or affirming portrayals (Fisher, 1993).

Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningful understanding of the psychological and social complexities surrounding delayed coming out. Future research should aim for more diverse samples and consider longitudinal approaches to capture evolving identity processes over time.

5. Conclusion

This study illuminates how compulsory heterosexuality operates as a deeply entrenched social force that shapes the life trajectories of older LGBP adults. Participants' narratives reveal the significant emotional and relational costs of conforming to heteronormative expectations, manifesting in delayed identity recognition, psychological distress, and a profound sense of lost time. Yet, these stories are also marked by remarkable resilience, self-compassion, and the reclamation of identity on their own terms.

By situating these findings within feminist, queer, and psychological frameworks, this research contributes to a growing understanding of queer temporality and identity fluidity across the lifespan. It affirms that coming out is not a singular moment but a nonlinear, deeply personal journey, often influenced by cultural, familial, and historical forces.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes that it is never too late to live authentically. Supporting the well-being of older LGBP adults requires not only individual affirmations but structural change, toward more inclusive narratives, services, and communities that validate queer lives at every age.

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