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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CHOSEN FAMILIES: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND RESILIENCE AMONG QUEER INDIVIDUALS

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#### ABSTRACT

Chosen families, composed of non-biological kinship networks, play a transformative role in enhancing mental health and resilience among queer individuals. This dissertation examines the impact of peer support networks on mental health outcomes and resilience among queer individuals. These networks provide unconditional emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and foster a sense of belonging, particularly in cases where traditional family structures may fail to offer adequate affirmation or acceptance. By creating safe spaces for self-expression and identity exploration, chosen families help mitigate mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Moreover, they contribute to resilience by promoting coping mechanisms, validating experiences, and encouraging open communication, ultimately empowering individuals to navigate adversity with strength and confidence. Using a quantitative research design, this study employs validated psychological scales, including the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), the LGBTQ Belongingness Attainment Scale (LGBTQ BAS), and the Perceived Social Support-Friends Scale (PSS-Fr). It gathers data from a sample of 100 queer individuals between the age 18-30 years. Findings from this study contribute to a growing body of literature on mental health interventions tailored to LGBTQ+ individuals, highlighting the significance of peer networks as protective factors. Implications for clinical practice, social policies, and community-based mental health programs are discussed, emphasizing the need for inclusive support structures that empower queer individuals in navigating mental health challenges. The findings support the hypothesis that peer support, often provided by chosen families, plays a vital role in reducing depression, anxiety and stress, and promoting resilience among queer individuals. They also support the hypothesis that LGBTQ+ belongingness reduces depression, anxiety and stress, and fosters resilience among queer individuals.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mental health disparities among LGBTQ+ individuals have been widely documented. Research consistently highlights that queer individuals experience higher rates of mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Meyer, 2003). These challenges are often linked to societal stigma, discrimination, lack of acceptance, minority stress, and rejection from biological families. In many regions, including India, these challenges are exacerbated by restrictive socio-cultural norms that marginalize queer communities. Given these systemic barriers, many queer individuals establish chosen families—non-biological support networks

composed of close friends and community members who provide emotional, social, and sometimes financial support, often denied by biological or legal kin. In a world where traditional family structures have historically been heteronormative and exclusionary, queer individuals have long sought refuge in *chosen families*. Chosen families function as a crucial protective mechanism for LGBTQ+ individuals, offering a sense of belonging, affirmation, and security that may be absent in traditional family structures (Weston, 1991). These intentional relationships, forged through shared experiences of marginalization, provide a safe and affirming space where individuals can express themselves freely, share their struggles, and access support. Such connections not only mitigate feelings of isolation but also promote empowerment

and collective healing, enabling individuals to navigate a hostile environment more effectively. In the context of India, where legal and societal recognition of queer identities has seen gradual progress but remains fraught with challenges, peer support networks play a pivotal role. The decriminalization of Section 377 in 2018 marked a significant milestone, but societal acceptance continues to lag, leaving many queer individuals vulnerable. Within this landscape, these networks serve as sanctuaries, fostering resilience and providing a sense of belonging. Yet, despite their cultural and emotional significance, the role of chosen families in shaping mental health outcomes remains underexplored in academic research. While qualitative studies highlight the importance of peer support in LGBTQ+ well-being, there remains a need for quantitative research examining its impact on mental health and resilience. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap by analysing how peer support networks, along with LGBTQ belongingness, influence mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, stress) and resilience among queer individuals.

**Context and Background:** The concept of chosen families emerged prominently during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, when queer communities mobilized to care for one another amid institutional neglect and familial rejection. Today, these networks continue to serve as vital lifelines, particularly for those estranged from their families of origin due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. While existing studies highlight the importance of social support for mental health, few have centered the unique dynamics of peer-led chosen families or their capacity to cultivate resilience in queer individuals. This omission is critical, as queer communities face disproportionately high rates of mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and suicidality, often linked to minority stressors such as discrimination, internalized stigma, and social isolation.

**Research Problem and Justification:** Despite growing recognition of the significance of peer support in LGBTQ+ communities, empirical evidence on its psychological benefits remains limited. Specifically, the mechanisms through which peer support influences mental health and resilience remain underexplored in the literature. Understanding these relationships is essential for developing effective mental health interventions, social support programs, and policy frameworks that recognize chosen families as a key source of well-being for LGBTQ+ individuals. Findings from this research will contribute to both theoretical understandings and practical applications, offering insights for mental health professionals, LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations, and policymakers seeking to support queer individuals through community-based initiatives.

## Theoretical Framework

**This study is grounded in two key psychological frameworks:**

- **Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003):** This theory posits that chronic stressors related to stigma, discrimination, and marginalization lead to poorer mental health outcomes among LGBTQ+ individuals. However, it also highlights the role of protective factors—such as peer support and resilience—in mitigating these adverse effects.

- **Social Support and Resilience Theory (Rutter, 1987):** This framework suggests that strong social support networks enhance an individual's ability to cope with stress and adversity. In this context, peer support networks (chosen families) function as resilience-building mechanisms, reducing the impact of psychological distress.

By integrating these theories, this research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological benefits of peer support networks and their role in fostering resilience among queer individuals.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- Worrell et al. (2022) explores the informal mental health support provided within LGBTQ communities, highlighting the significant reliance on peer support due to barriers in accessing formal services. The study, based on interviews with 25 LGBTQ individuals, reveals that support roles often extend existing relationships, leading to potential burnout and stress for those providing assistance. The findings underscore the need for better support systems for informal caregivers to mitigate the negative impact of their roles.
- Worrell et al. (2024) explored the nature of mental health peer support among 326 LGBTQ adults who provided support to peers in 2020. The study found that peer supporters helped a wide range of individuals—including friends, colleagues, and strangers—mainly with issues like depression, anxiety, suicidality, and discrimination. Many supporters were also managing their own mental health challenges. Those with mental health training reported more positive experiences than those without. The study emphasizes the need for LGBTQ-affirmative mental health services and targeted support for peer supporters to enhance both their well-being and the effectiveness of the support they provide.
- Wandrekar et al. (2019) explored the effectiveness of SAAHAS, a queer-affirmative CBT-based therapy group for LGBTQIA+ individuals in Mumbai, India. Facilitated by queer psychologists, the program provided a free and open therapeutic space designed to affirm queer identities and address their unique mental health needs. Based on feedback from 15 participants, the group was perceived as a safe and supportive space that contributed to improved mental health, reduced emotional distress and isolation, and helped participants develop coping skills. The study highlights the positive impact of peer support, affirming therapeutic environments, and community-led mental health interventions in enhancing psychological well-being among queer individuals.
- The study by Banik et al. (2018) highlights the complex social support networks of sexual minority women in Mumbai, revealing their reliance on both intimate partners and broader social connections. Through photo-elicitation interviews with 18 participants, the research illustrates how these women navigate their relationships to foster resilience and improve health outcomes.
- Shilo et al. (2015) investigated how individual and community-level resilience factors affect the mental health of LGBTQ youth and adults in Israel. The study analyzed data from 890 participants to understand how protective factors like family support, peer support, LGBTQ community connectedness, and relationships

mitigate mental health risks. The findings revealed that family support was especially important for youth, while adults benefited more from friendships, community involvement, and steady partnerships. They also highlight the need for multi-level support systems—including family, peers, and LGBTQ networks—to promote positive mental health across different age groups within the queer community.

- Kia et al. (2023) explored the role of peer support in fostering resilience among transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals in Canada. Through semi-structured interviews with 35 participants from Toronto and Vancouver, the study found that peer support is a vital resource in helping TGD individuals navigate systemic oppression, stigma, and discrimination. Participants described peer support as life-saving, contributing significantly to their emotional resilience and overall well-being. The study emphasizes the need for gender-affirming care to include consistent access to peer support, while also noting that this area remains under-examined and warrants further attention in both research and practice.
- Johnson and Rogers (2020) conducted a study that explored how peer support and community involvement impact the mental health of transgender individuals in the southeastern U.S. Drawing on 158 hours of participant observation and 33 interviews within a trans community organization, the study identifies three key ways peer support enhances well-being: normalizing trans identities and experiences, building social support networks, and fostering empowerment. The findings underscore how community engagement helps buffer against stigma and improves mental health outcomes for trans people.
- Borthwick et al. (2020) examined various peer support models used to support LGBTQ+ individuals' mental health, aiming to inform policy and practice for Health Education England. The review identified three main types of peer support: naturally occurring support within communities, peer-run networks, and professionally facilitated peer support based on shared experiences of identity and/or mental health challenges. Among these, professionally run peer support was found to be particularly effective in preventing mental health issues, as it reduces isolation, enhances self-esteem, and creates affirming spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can share and normalize their experiences. The study highlights the value of integrating lived experience with structured mental health support.
- The study by McConnell et al. (2015) examines how different combinations of social support sources—family, peers, and significant others—affect mental health outcomes in LGBT youth. The research highlights that LGBT youth face a heightened risk of negative mental health outcomes, often due to minority stressors like victimization. Social support, however, is shown to promote better mental health, and the study explores how various combinations of support from family, peers, and significant others influence mental well-being. The analysis of 232 LGBT youth aged 16-20 reveals that different patterns of support are linked to mental health outcomes, with higher socio-economic status correlating with more support from all sources.
- The scoping review by Bonato et al. (2021) examines the role of peer support in reducing suicide risk within trans populations, based on 34 studies published between 2000 and 2020. The review highlights that peer support is generally protective against suicide risk for trans individuals. However, it also identifies underexplored sources of peer support, such as online support from trans peers, which are not consistently addressed in the existing literature. The review calls for further research to refine how peer support for trans people is conceptualized and understood.
- Matsick et al. (2024) reviewed factors influencing LGBTQ+ people's sense of belonging across individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels, using a social ecological model to promote their psychosocial well-being and address health disparities. They concluded that a sense of belonging significantly influences mental health outcomes in LGBTQ+ individuals, promoting prosperity and reducing health disparities. Enhancing belonging through individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors can mitigate the negative mental health impact associated with stigma and discrimination.
- Izutsu and Tsutsumi (2024) discussed the mental health and well-being of LGBTQI+ persons, highlighting the widespread human rights violations they face globally due to discrimination and social barriers. They concluded that a lack of belongingness among LGBTQI individuals is linked to poorer mental health outcomes, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Social support and community connections are crucial for enhancing mental well-being and mitigating these risks.
- Szymanski and Gonzalez (2020) reviewed both qualitative and quantitative research that highlights how resilience can manifest at various levels: individual, interpersonal, community, and structural. They explored the concept of resilience among sexual and gender minorities, particularly focusing on LGBTQ individuals who often face social stigma and minority stress. They found that belongingness within LGBTQ communities can enhance resilience by providing social support, fostering positive identity, and buffering against minority stress, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes for queer individuals facing societal stigma.
- Robinson et al. (2024) conducted qualitative interviews with 83 LGBTQ youth from California and Texas, revealing that the intersecting identities of age, sexuality, gender, and race shape their experiences and perceptions of various types of support, including familial, emotional, informational, and instrumental support. The study highlighted that perceived social support from friends significantly influences the mental health of LGBTQ youth, particularly for those of color.
- Wootton et al. (2024) conducted a study, based on a survey of 520 sexual minority women (SMW). They found that greater levels of overall social support, including support from friends, was associated with increased resilience in sexual minority women. This suggests that perceived social support from friends can positively impact resilience in queer individuals. Additionally, the research indicated that the benefits of social support are consistent across different ethno-racial and sexual identities, suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing social support could improve mental and behavioral health outcomes for sexual minority women.

## METHOD

**AIM:** To explore the impact of peer support networks (measured by Perceived Social Support-Friends Scale) and LGBTQ Belongingness (measured by LGBTQ Belongingness Attainment Scale) on the mental health and resilience of queer individuals (measured by Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale and Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale)

### OBJECTIVES

- To explore the relationship between Perceived Social Support-Friends and mental health outcomes in queer individuals
- To explore the relationship between Perceived Social Support-Friends and resilience in queer individuals
- To explore the relationship between LGBTQ Belongingness and mental health outcomes in queer individuals
- To explore the relationship between LGBTQ Belongingness and resilience in queer individuals

### HYPOTHESES

#### One-Tailed Test

#### Perceived Social Support & Mental Health (Depression, Anxiety, Stress)

- **H<sub>0</sub> (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant relationship between perceived social support (PSS-Fr) and mental health (DASS-21) among queer individuals.
- **H<sub>1</sub> (Alternative Hypothesis):** Higher perceived social support (PSS-Fr) is significantly associated with lower depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS-21) among queer individuals.

#### Perceived Social Support & Resilience

- **H<sub>0</sub> (Null Hypothesis) :** There is no significant relationship between perceived social support (PSS-Fr) and resilience (CD-RISC) among queer individuals.
- **H<sub>1</sub> (Alternative Hypothesis):** Higher perceived social support (PSS-Fr) is significantly associated with higher resilience (CD-RISC) among queer individuals.

#### LGBTQ Belongingness & Mental Health

- **H<sub>0</sub> (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant relationship between LGBTQ belongingness (LGBTQ BAS) and mental health (DASS-21) among queer individuals.
- **H<sub>1</sub> (Alternative Hypothesis):** Higher LGBTQ belongingness (LGBTQ BAS) is significantly associated with lower depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS-21) among queer individuals.

#### LGBTQ Belongingness & Resilience

- **H<sub>0</sub> (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant relationship between LGBTQ belongingness (LGBTQ BAS) and resilience (CD-RISC) among queer individuals.

- **H<sub>1</sub> (Alternative Hypothesis):** Higher LGBTQ belongingness (LGBTQ BAS) is significantly associated with higher resilience (CD-RISC) among queer individuals.

**LOCALE OF STUDY:** The present study was conducted among queer individuals residing primarily in urban regions of India. Given the sensitive nature of the subject and the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community, data collection was carried out through online platforms such as social media, LGBTQ+ support forums, and community outreach networks. This approach allowed for greater accessibility, inclusivity, and anonymity, enabling participants from different parts of the country to participate, particularly those connected to peer support networks or chosen families.

### VARIABLES

Dependent Variables:

- **Mental Health (DASS-21)**
- **Resilience (CD-RISC)**

Independent Variables:

- **Perceived Social Support (PSS-Friends)**
- **LGBTQ Belongingness (LGBTQ BAS)**

**SAMPLE AND ITS SELECTION:** The sample for this study consisted of 100 queer individuals residing primarily in urban and semi-urban areas of India. Participants identified across a range of gender identities (including cisgender, transgender, non-binary, genderfluid and agender individuals) and sexual orientations (such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and queer). Inclusion criteria required participants to be 18-30 years old, identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and reside in India currently. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used, as the study targeted a specific, marginalized population that is often underrepresented in mainstream mental health research. To enhance reach and diversity within the queer community, snowball sampling was also employed—participants were encouraged to share the survey link within their personal networks, particularly among chosen families and peer support groups. Data collection was conducted through online surveys distributed via social media platforms (such as Instagram and WhatsApp), LGBTQ+ community pages, and relevant forums. This method allowed for greater accessibility, anonymity, and geographic spread, while also accommodating individuals who may not have access to physical queer-affirmative spaces.

**Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21):** The DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale – 21 items) is a brief self-report questionnaire designed to assess the severity of symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and stress over the past week. It consists of 21 items, with 7 items per subscale, and each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("Did not apply to me at all") to 3 ("Applied to me very much or most of the time"). It is a shortened version of the original 42-item scale and is widely used in both clinical and research settings due to its efficiency and strong psychometric properties. Although it does not provide a clinical diagnosis, it helps identify levels of emotional distress and is a useful tool for mental health screening and outcome evaluation.

Table 1.Tool Description

S.No.	Name of the Tool	No. of items	Reliability	Validity
1.	Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale	21	0.88 Test-Retest Method	Good convergent validity
2.	Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale	10	0.87 Test-Retest Method	Good convergent and divergent validity
3.	LGBTQ Belongingness Attainment Scale	18	0.95 Cronbach’s alpha Method	Good construct and convergent validity
4.	Perceived Social Support-Friends Scale	20	0.86 Test-Retest Method	Good construct, convergent and divergent validity

- Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10):** The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale – 10 item version (CD-RISC-10) is a brief, self-report measure designed to assess an individual’s resilience, or their ability to cope with adversity, stress, and challenges. It consists of 10 statements (e.g., "I am able to adapt when changes occur"), each rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 ("Not true at all") to 4 ("True nearly all the time"). The total score reflects the overall level of resilience, with higher scores indicating greater resilience. It is a streamlined version of the original 25-item scale, retaining strong reliability and validity while being more practical for use in research, clinical, and community settings.
- LGBTQ Belongingness Attainment Scale (LGBTQ BAS):** The LGBTQ Belongingness Attainment Scale is a self-report measure developed to assess an individual’s sense of belonging within the LGBTQ community. It captures the extent to which LGBTQ individuals feel connected, affiliated, and supported by their peers in the community. It includes items that reflect experiences of companionship, affiliation, and emotional connectedness, which together form a second-order factor representing overall belongingness. It consists of 18 statements, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 6 ("Strongly Agree"). It has demonstrated strong internal consistency and construct validity, making it a valuable tool for research and clinical work focused on social support, identity affirmation, and mental health among LGBTQ populations.
- Perceived Social Support-Friends Scale (PSS-Fr):** The Perceived Social Support–Friends Scale is a self-report questionnaire designed to assess the extent to which individuals feel supported by their friends. It is one of two subscales developed by Prociano and Heller (1983) to measure perceived social support, with the other focusing on family. The PSS-Fr includes items that reflect feelings of emotional closeness, trust, and availability of support from friends. It consists of 20 statements, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 6 ("Strongly Agree").

It has demonstrated strong reliability and validity, and is widely used in both clinical and research settings to explore the relationship between peer support and psychological well-being.

**PROCEDURE:** After providing informed consent, participants completed an online survey on Google Forms. The survey included demographic questions followed by standardized self-report measures: the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale – 21 items (DASS-21), Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale – 10 items (CD-RISC-10), LGBTQ Belongingness Attainment Scale (LGBTQ BAS), and the Perceived Social Support–Friends Scale (PSS-Fr). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. The scoring for each respondent was done

individually. Data was then exported and analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the four variables. Then, correlation was calculated for the four variables to examine the relationships between peer support, resilience, belongingness, and mental health outcomes.

## RESULTS

Data collected from 100 queer individuals aged 18–30 was analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The results revealed significant relationships among the variables:

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std Dev	Variance	Kurtosis	S.E. Kurt	Skewness	S.E. Skew	Range	Minimum	Maximum
DASS	100	33.86	16.50	272.26	-.96	.48	.00	.24	63.00	.00	63.00
PSS	100	10.77	5.32	28.28	-1.08	.48	.05	.24	19.00	1.00	20.00
Resilience	100	21.14	9.43	88.99	-.93	.48	-.01	.24	36.00	2.00	38.00
LGBTQ_BAS	100	61.59	35.82	1282.87	-1.01	.48	-.53	.24	107.00	1.00	108.00
Valid N (listwise)	100										
Missing N (listwise)	0										

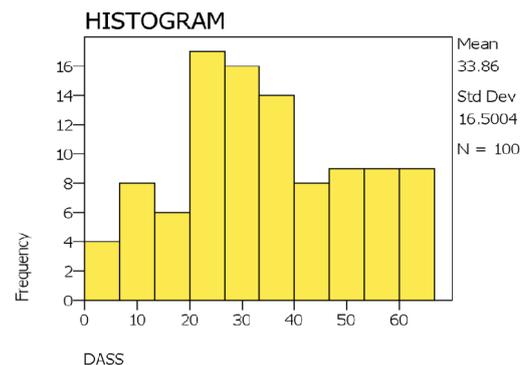


Chart 1. Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) Scores

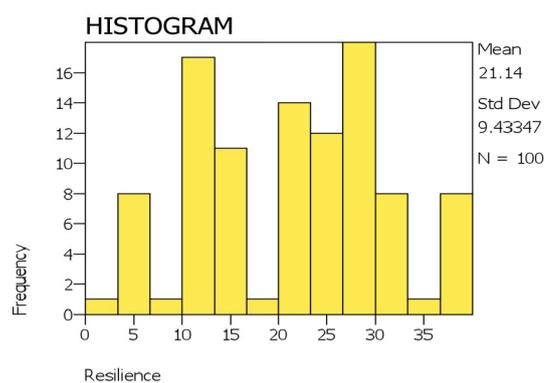


Chart 2. Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10) Scores

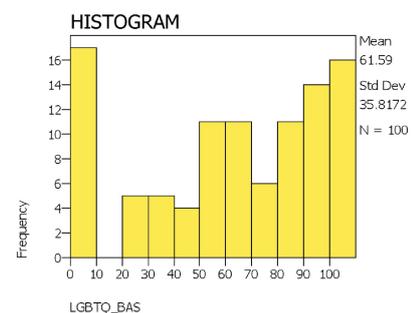


Chart 3. LGBTQ Belongingness Attainment Scale (LGBTQ BAS) Scores

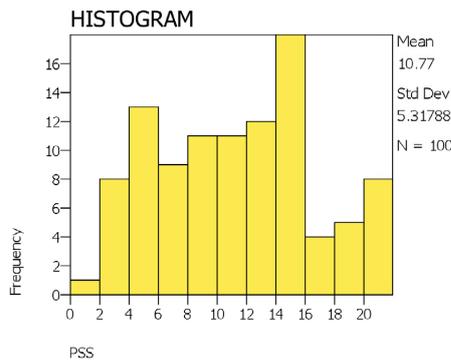


Chart 4. Perceived Social Support Scale – Friends (PSS-Fr) Scores

- Perceived Social Support from Friends (PSS-Fr) was negatively correlated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, indicating that individuals who reported higher peer support experienced better mental health outcomes.
- PSS-Fr was also positively correlated with resilience (CD-RISC-10), suggesting that greater perceived support from friends is associated with a stronger ability to cope with adversity.
- LGBTQ Belongingness (LGBTQ BAS) showed a significant negative correlation with mental health difficulties, meaning higher belongingness was linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.
- Additionally, LGBTQ Belongingness was positively associated with resilience, further emphasizing the protective role of community connectedness.
- Overall, the findings supported all four alternative hypotheses, indicating that both peer support and a sense of LGBTQ belongingness are key protective factors for enhancing mental health and resilience among queer individuals.

**Correlation Analysis:** To test the hypotheses, Pearson’s correlation coefficient (r) was calculated between the independent and dependent variables. The results are as follows:

Table 3. Correlation between peer support and depression, anxiety, and stress

		DASS	PSS
DASS	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.989
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	100	100
PSS	Pearson Correlation	-.989	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

Correlation is significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels

Table 4. Correlation between peer support and resilience

		PSS	Resilience
PSS	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.989
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	100	100
Resilience	Pearson Correlation	.989	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

Correlation is significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels

Table 5. Correlation between LGBTQ belongingness and depression, anxiety, and stress

		GBTQ_BAS	DASS
LGBTQ_BAS	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.966
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	100	100
DASS	Pearson Correlation	-.966	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

Correlation is significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels

Table 6. Correlation between LGBTQ belongingness and resilience

		GBTQ_BAS	Resilience
LGBTQ_BAS	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.968
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	100	100
Resilience	Pearson Correlation	.968	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100

Correlation is significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels

**Perceived Social Support and Mental Health Outcomes (DASS-21)**

**Total DASS Score:**  $r = -0.98, p < 0.01$

There is a significant negative correlation between perceived social support from friends and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. As support from peers increased, these symptoms decreased.

**Perceived Social Support and Resilience (CD-RISC-10)**

**Resilience:**  $r = +0.98, p < 0.01$

There is a significant positive correlation between perceived social support from friends and resilience. Individuals who felt more supported by friends also demonstrated higher levels of psychological resilience.

**LGBTQ Belongingness and Mental Health Outcomes (DASS-21)**

**Total DASS Score:**  $r = -0.96, p < 0.01$

There is a significant negative correlation between LGBTQ belongingness and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Higher LGBTQ belongingness was significantly associated with lower psychological distress, highlighting the protective influence of community connectedness on mental health.

**LGBTQ Belongingness and Resilience (CD-RISC-10)**

**Resilience:**  $r = 0.96, p < 0.01$

There is a significant positive correlation between LGBTQ belongingness and resilience. This suggests that individuals who feel a stronger sense of belonging within the LGBTQ community also report greater resilience in coping with adversity.

## DISCUSSION

**Interpretation of Results:** The purpose of this study was to explore the role of peer support networks—specifically, chosen families and LGBTQ belongingness in influencing mental health outcomes and resilience among queer individuals in India. Using validated psychological tools (DASS-21, CD-RISC-10, PSS-Fr, and LGBTQ BAS), the findings offer significant insights into the protective functions of social and community-based support in the lives of LGBTQ individuals. Table 1 indicates that there is a significant negative correlation between perceived social support from friends and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. This implies that as support from peers increased, these symptoms decreased. Table 2 indicates that there is a significant positive correlation between perceived social support from friends and resilience. This shows that individuals who felt more supported by friends also demonstrated higher levels of psychological resilience. These findings support the hypothesis that peer support - often provided by chosen families—plays a vital role in reducing psychological distress and promoting adaptive coping mechanisms among queer individuals.

Table 3 indicates that there is a significant negative correlation between LGBTQ belongingness and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. This shows that higher LGBTQ belongingness is significantly associated with lower psychological distress. Table 4 indicates that there is a significant positive correlation between LGBTQ belongingness and resilience. This implies that individuals who feel a stronger sense of belonging within the LGBTQ community also report greater resilience in coping with adversity. This confirms the importance of community connectedness and identity affirmation in fostering emotional well-being and resilience, especially for individuals who may face marginalization, discrimination, or rejection from their biological families. These findings are consistent with the Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), which highlights the mental health burdens placed on LGBTQ individuals due to stigma and social exclusion. The protective role of chosen families and community belongingness, as evidenced in this study, aligns with the Social Support and Resilience Theory (Rutter, 1987), which emphasizes the buffering effect of supportive networks on mental health.

**Table 7. Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis	Result
Higher perceived social support is associated with lower depression, anxiety, and stress	Supported
Higher perceived social support is associated with higher resilience	Supported
Higher LGBTQ belongingness is associated with lower depression, anxiety, and stress	Supported
Higher LGBTQ belongingness is associated with higher resilience	Supported

**Comparison with Previous Literature:** This study reinforces previous research that underscores the importance of peer networks in LGBTQ well-being. For example, studies such as those by Worrell et al. (2022, 2024) and Wandrekar et al. (2019) emphasize the mental health benefits of informal peer support systems within LGBTQ communities. These works also point to the dual role of peer supporters who both offer and receive emotional support in the absence of formal mental

health structures. Additionally, the strong correlation between LGBTQ belongingness and resilience mirrors findings by Shilo et al. (2015) and Johnson et al. (2020), which suggest that community involvement and identity validation contribute to enhanced mental health and coping strategies. The present study adds to this body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence from the Indian context, where chosen families are increasingly essential due to ongoing cultural and institutional barriers.

### Implications of the Study

- **Theoretical Implications:** This research contributes to the growing body of literature on queer resilience and community-based mental health, offering quantitative evidence to support theories around the role of chosen families in psychological well-being. It demonstrates how LGBTQ belongingness and peer support function as interconnected resilience factors that mitigate the effects of minority stress.
- **Practical Implications:** These findings have important implications for clinical practice and community-based mental health programs. Mental health professionals working with queer clients should consider integrating peer support models and fostering safe, affirming spaces for identity exploration. Community organizations and LGBTQ advocacy groups can use this research to design targeted interventions that strengthen peer networks and promote a sense of belonging. Additionally, this study supports policy advocacy for legal recognition of chosen families, including access to shared resources, healthcare decision-making, and social services—critical for improving overall LGBTQ well-being.

### Limitations of the Study

**While the findings are significant, certain limitations must be acknowledged:**

- The sample consisted primarily of urban and semi-urban participants with internet access, which may not represent the experiences of rural or less-connected queer populations.
- The study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias.
- Due to its cross-sectional design, causal relationships between variables cannot be conclusively established.
- The study focused on peer support and LGBTQ belongingness; other forms of support (e.g., romantic partners, mentors, extended families) were not assessed.

**Recommendations for Future Research:** Future studies could adopt a longitudinal design to explore how peer support and belongingness influence mental health over time. Expanding the sample to include more diverse socio-economic and geographic backgrounds will improve generalizability.

Qualitative research may also provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals within chosen families, enriching our understanding of the emotional dynamics and support mechanisms in such networks.

## CONCLUSION

Using a sample of 100 participants aged 18–30 and standardized psychological measures (DASS-21, CD-RISC-10, PSS-Fr, and LGBTQ BAS), this study examined how support from peers and a sense of community belongingness influence mental health outcomes and resilience within a marginalized population.

### The main findings of the study revealed that

- Higher perceived social support from friends is significantly correlated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, and higher levels of resilience.
- Similarly, higher LGBTQ belongingness is significantly correlated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, and higher levels of resilience.

These results confirm that chosen families and peer networks serve as powerful protective factors, buffering the adverse effects of minority stress, discrimination, and familial rejection often experienced by queer individuals. The study also reinforces theoretical frameworks such as the Minority Stress Theory and Social Support and Resilience Theory, both of which highlight the importance of supportive social environments in promoting psychological well-being. The significance of these findings lies in their practical and societal implications. In clinical settings, mental health professionals must consider incorporating peer-led interventions and community-affirming approaches that recognize the unique structures of support within LGBTQ populations. At the community and policy level, these findings advocate for greater recognition and validation of chosen families, urging institutions to extend legal and social protections to non-biological support networks.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that fostering belongingness and peer connection is not only affirming but essential for the mental health and resilience of queer individuals. As the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community continues to grow, so too must the systems that support their well-being in affirming, inclusive, and culturally sensitive ways.

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