Experiences of Peer Interaction Amongst Autistic LGBTQ+ Youth in Secondary Institutions

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Experiences of Peer Interaction Amongst Autistic LGBTQ+ Youth in Secondary Institutions

MSW Thesis

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Submitted in partial completion of the requirement for the Master of Social Work degree ©
Abstract

This study uncovered the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth on the autism spectrum in Ontario secondary institutions and examined how their interactions with peers shape identity, mental health, well-being, and social belonging. This qualitative research involved interviewing six autistic LGBTQ+ youth across Ontario over Zoom. The study was guided by constructivism, critical theory, neurodiversity, and intersectionality. Results suggest that participants faced discrimination through microaggressions, peer victimization, and stereotyping, which led to feeling less safe in their school environments. Participants also had positive, affirming experiences relating to other peers standing up for them and recognizing their identities, as well as through supporting other peers that experienced similar challenges. This research has broad implications for social work practice, as it can allow social workers and youth to have a better understanding of and advocate for LGBTQ+ youth on the autism spectrum in secondary schools. 

**Key words:** LGBTQ+; Peer victimization; Neurodiversity; Peer relationships; Autistic young adults.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents ............................................................................................ iv

Introduction ...................................................................................................... 1

Positionality Statement and Critical Reflexivity .............................................. 2

Literature Review ............................................................................................. 7

   Bullying/Peer Victimization .......................................................................................................................... 7

   Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences in Bullying .............................................................. 8

   Intersection of Autistic and LGBTQ+ Identity ............................................................................. 10

Research Questions .......................................................................................... 13

Theoretical Framework/Orientation .................................................................... 13

   Epistemological Paradigms ......................................................................................................................... 14

   Neurodiversity ........................................................................................................................................... 14

   Intersectionality ................................................................................................................................. 15

Methods ..................................................................................................................... 17

   Participants .............................................................................................................................................. 17

   Methodology .......................................................................................................................................... 19

   Data Analysis ......................................................................................................................................... 20

   Member Reflections .............................................................................................................................. 21

Key Findings ......................................................................................................... 22

Discussion & Implications for Social Work ............................................................................. 37

   Implications ......................................................................................................................................... 41
Study Limitations & Future Directions ................................................................. 45
Conclusion............................................................................................................... 46
References............................................................................................................. 47
Appendices............................................................................................................ 58
  Appendix A: TCPS Certificate................................................................. 58
  Appendix B: Ethics Approval Form........................................................ 59
  Appendix C: Informed Consent............................................................... 60
  Appendix D: Recruitment Poster, Email Template and Facebook Post Template... 63
  Appendix E: Interview Guide................................................................. 66
Introduction

Youth that belong to marginalized groups are perceived to be different amongst their peers and are particularly at risk for being victimized in education institutions. This includes youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) as well as youth with disabilities such as autism (Butler et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2021). Research indicates it is more likely for autistic individuals to identify as transgender or demonstrate more cross-gendered behaviours, and experience same sex attraction than the general population (Brunissen et al., 2020; Dewinter et al., 2017; van der Miesen et al., 2018). Compared to cisgender adolescents and those with diverse sexual orientations, transgender individuals are at the greatest risk of being victimized. Furthermore, transgender individuals who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum are at an even greater risk of victimization and self-harm (Strauss et al., 2021). Because of the greater risk of victimization for these groups, mental health difficulties can arise more often, and it has become clear that social support is an important factor in improving mental health for these adolescent populations (Button et al., 2012).

This manuscript thesis focuses on peer victimization and affirming experiences of LGBTQ+ autistic youth while in secondary school. Moreover, this manuscript thesis focuses on how their experiences with peers, family, and school staff impact their identity, mental health, social belonging and wellbeing. I recognize that there is historical and ongoing pathologization of autistic, LGBTQ+ individuals, often through medicalization, which has led to increased vulnerability to victimization and systemic marginalization (Drescher, 2015; Toscano & Maynard, 2014; Waltz, 2008). I aim to acknowledge the unfortunate history while diverting from that narrative by highlighting the youths’ lived experience. I intend to submit this manuscript thesis to the *Qualitative Social Work Journal* for publication.
Positionality Statement and Critical Reflexivity

My interest in this topic arose in my fourth year of my undergraduate studies at Saint Mary’s University, Nova Scotia, when I took classes that covered the topics of human sexuality, disabilities, and victimization. Volunteering with Autism Nova Scotia, having a family member diagnosed with autism, and working with an LGBTQ+ youth client on the autism spectrum, have all been crucial experiences that have ignited my passion for supporting, ethically engaging with, and gaining more theoretical knowledge regarding this population. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to accumulate knowledge and experience with transgender and autistic youth which has provided me with a base understanding for this thesis. Despite having some experiences with LGBTQ+ and autistic populations in volunteer and work capacities, through this thesis, I occupy the academic role of a researcher as part of a Master of Social Work thesis program at Wilfrid Laurier University. Also, I still cannot claim to fully understand this population from a personal (identity) perspective due to my identity as non-autistic and cisgender woman. Because of my outsider status of being non-autistic, this could bias the research by creating gaps in understanding the themes that participants conveyed during the research process. My hope is that such misunderstandings can be reduced through the member reflection process, a part of data analysis that allowed participants to provide feedback on preliminary themes/subthemes.

Another key aspect of my positionality that could bias the research is my racial identity. My white, Canadian identity provides unearned advantages, while limiting me from fully understanding all the research participants’ lived experience in terms of race. I have blind spots that could have hidden the perspective of racialized participants, and unconscious biases that prioritize white perspectives as a result of growing up and living in a racist society. My whiteness impacts the way that I move through the world, my perspective, and the way that I
perceive academia, research, and others' experiences. There are many examples of unearned advantages that result from my race as a white person. For instance, my race was something that I could and did easily ignore before my university education. Even though I have learned about race academically, it is still something that is invisibly serving me, and that I could choose not to focus on. Though unintentional, my whiteness shows up in the room and enacts white supremacy due to the historical roots of race. As an individual in the social work profession, I must not ignore the deleterious effect that this profession has had upon Indigenous children and families in Canada, through the enactment of and complicity within the residential school system and sixties scoop. As a white settler, I acknowledge that the land I reside on has been historically and still is currently being inhabited and cherished by Indigenous communities (Kennedy-Kish Bell et al., 2017).

As a cisgender woman, I must acknowledge that there are unearned advantages (privileges) associated with being categorized as cisgender, which is seen as the dominant gender, with cisgender men having even more advantages than women. This is promoted through systems and structures that often marginalize anyone that does not conform to the dominant societal standards of what gender should look like and how it is to be performed. One example of how cisgender privilege has benefitted me is that I am free from experiencing hostility when using the female washroom (Lehmann & Leavey, 2017). Individuals who identify as heterosexual and appear to be heterosexual also experience privilege for their sexual orientation. For instance, heterosexual relationships have had unearned advantages in the areas of marriage, child custody, and adoption, being socially accepted in diverse social contexts, having the freedom to mainly associate with individuals from one’s own group across various social settings, tax and insurance benefits, and more (Simoni & Walters, 2001).
If one does not examine their own implications in dominant systems, individuals in positions of power, including social workers could unintentionally perpetuate oppression. The way that the context of harm is positioned is not inconsequential and social workers can/should never assume innocence. Social workers are not immune to reverting to the dominant societal narrative if they do not challenge their worldview. For example, Indigenous parents were conveniently positioned as the site of harm to their child in the name of the white settler colonial project. This positioning of harm led to children being forcibly taken from their homes and into residential schools to be stripped of their culture. This cultural genocide has understandably led to ongoing intergenerational trauma (Kennedy-Kish Bell et al., 2017). This intergenerational trauma is an example of why social workers need to examine their implications in the system, because complacency can lead to detrimental impacts on marginalized populations.

Social work as a profession aims to inherently do no harm, however, because of certain structures, historical norms, and societal prejudices, social work has still been implicated in the oppression of LGBTQ+ individuals, racialized, and other marginalized communities. Additionally, throughout the course of history both autistic and LGBTQ+ individuals have been subjected to the detrimental practice of pathologization. Historically, any type of behaviour perceived as outside of the socially accepted norms at the time was considered troublesome and requiring medical intervention (Toscano & Maynard, 2014). Thus, LGBTQ+ individuals were viewed as morally bad, and/or in need of medical help as having sexual attraction towards the same gender as well as identifying as another gender than the one assigned at birth was not in line with societal preferences or norms, which is largely political as well (Drescher, 2015; Toscano & Maynard, 2014). Medicalization in the LGBTQ+ community was seen through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and through the use of conversion
therapy (Conine et al., 2021). Furthermore, autism has also had troubling deficit-focused narratives that constructed autism as a catastrophic medical condition which leaves autistic individual vulnerable to distressing therapies intended to “normalize” and inhibit unique autistic traits instead of embracing neurodiverse perspectives (Conine et al., 2021). These historical beliefs brought about pathologization, institutionalization, belittlement, exclusion, and discrimination for LGBTQ+ and autistic individuals (Toscano & Maynard, 2014), and led to the suppression of the full potential of these communities in terms of rights and quality of life.

Reynold’s (2020) work on trauma applies to autism and LGBTQ+ populations, as she discusses a useful stance to take when considering working with these populations. We must take up a witnessing stance when working with populations that have been oppressed, which “requires that we situate personal suffering in its sociopolitical context and resist the individualisation and medicalization of suffering” (p. 347). When we observe our own messy positioning (and implications) within our broader cultural contexts (cis-heteronormative, ableist society) we can understand and unlock the power of the voices of others who are different from our own positionality. Further, it is only when we step into a position/stance that acknowledges and attempts to set aside our biases, while also taking a stance of curiosity, that we can truly begin to understand others who are different from ourselves. While it is deeply meaningful and important, I am not convinced that it is enough to simply observe where and how we have become stuck within the web of our cis-heteronormative ableist complicity. What is also needed is the courage to speak up about these issues. By not researching or speaking up about these issues, we stay complicit in the systems that we live in, allowing for populations of people to be tarnished by misinformation and stereotypes.
‘Homosexuality’ was historically considered a mental disorder, as it was in the DSM. More recently, gender identity disorder was in the DSM up until 2013, when it was changed to gender dysphoria (Toscano & Maynard, 2014). As a result of pathologizing gender identities outside of cis-gender and sexual orientations other than heterosexual, conversion therapy was once promoted as a way to alter one’s gender identity, sexual orientation, or gender expression. Unfortunately, many LGBTQ+ individuals were forced into conversion therapy, and research shows that this type of therapy is unethical and lacks scientific credibility (Conine et al., 2021). There is also evidence to show that applied behaviour analysis (ABA) is harmful for LGBTQ+ individuals (Conine et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, there are many autistic self-advocates who claim that (ABA) for the treatment of innocuous autistic behaviour is oppressive, and they oppose its ideological objectives (Kirkham, 2017). As a non-autistic individual, I have had the privilege of not being put into (ABA) treatment or facing societal stigma that autistic individuals face. As a soon to be social worker, I recognize that the profession has oppressively labelled and treated LGBTQ+ and autistic individuals. I aim to advocate for the wellbeing and rights of LGBTQ+ autistic individuals and continue to work towards inclusive practice through receiving ongoing training around topics of diversity and being critically reflexive in my social work practice.

Through the process of writing this thesis, I am more cognizant of dominant societal narratives, such as internalized ableism and the gender binary. Though those narratives have become inculcated within myself, I have attempted to mentally push back against these. I recognize that the knowledge I have generated is not neutral nor detached from me (Mason, 2002). Therefore, I sought to comprehend the role I played in this research endeavor. This awareness of the researcher is connected to the concept of reflexivity. Probst’s (2015) discussion
of reflexivity is the “awareness of the influence the researcher has on the people or topic being studied, while simultaneously recognizing how the research experience is affecting the researcher” (p. 37). I have engaged in the process of reflexivity through examining my own positionalities as they relate to the research, which has aided in managing the issues of research bias and reactivity (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). I have practiced the self-reflection inherent in reflexivity through engaging in dialogue with social work colleagues, my thesis committee, and by keeping a personal written journal (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). It is necessary to deeply reflect upon the ways my positionality biases the research process and results to increase research ethicality and trustworthiness.

**Literature Review**

In this literature review, I focus on defining bullying/peer victimization and discussing gender and sexual orientation and its role in bullying, bullying in the context of gender and sexual orientation, and the intersection of an autistic and LGBTQ+ identity.

**Bullying/Peer Victimization**

Bullying in the school context is an issue that has been around for many years. This is especially an issue of concern for individuals who are noticeably different than the norm. It is important to get a clearer understanding of what bullying is, which includes the different forms of it, because all types of bullying are equally relevant, but they could impact diverse peer groups differently. Bullying is defined by an intentional, repeated aggressive behavior towards a victim who cannot easily defend themselves due to a power imbalance (Popp & Peguero, 2011). There are a few different forms of bullying. The term peer victimization is also used to encompass the traditional bullying behaviors (physical, emotional, and verbal bullying) (Fisher & Taylor, 2016). Verbal bullying happens when a perpetrator makes any kind of statement towards another person
with the intention of emotionally hurting this person, which includes abusive/mocking language or name-calling. Physical bullying is characterized by any sort of attack to the body (e.g. pushing or hitting). Relational bullying is when a perpetrator manipulates the way other people act or feel towards a victim, in order to weaken the victim’s relationships. For example, the perpetrator could devise to spread a rumor about the victim (Gentry et al., 2015). These bullying behaviors are contingent upon unequal power relations where the victimized student finds it hard to defend themself from the student(s) perceived to possess more dominance over them (Popp & Peguero, 2011). The effects of bullying often include reduced academic success, security at school, school attendance, and self-esteem, sometimes leading to suicide (Peguero, 2012).

While anyone can be a victim of bullying, youth with disabilities; overweight youth; racial and ethnic minorities; and LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately affected by bullying behavior (Forrest et al., 2020; Kahle & Peguero, 2017). Prejudice towards minority groups makes the individuals belonging to these groups more at risk of getting bullied than members of the general population. The aforementioned research highlights the need for social work education on diverse groups to reduce prejudice, which could be part of anti-bullying and discrimination intervention programming/policies in educational institutions (Forrest et al., 2020; Kahle & Peguero, 2017).

**Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences in Bullying**

Bullying is connected to gender and sexual orientation in different ways, and it is likely that individuals that are seen as existing outside of the gender binary of male/female would be more likely to be victimized (Beck et al., 2023). Beck et al.’s (2023) research demonstrates how the heteronormative gender/sex/sexuality system enacts violence upon non-normative identities, especially non-binary identities. Peter et al. (2021) reported on gendered experiences of bullying based on survey data from 3558 Canadian students in grades 8 or higher. Harassment and bullying
at school targeting cisgender GBQ boys tended to be more direct (physical and verbal harassment), whereas cisgender LGBQ girls experienced more indirect types of aggression (mean rumours or lies and cyber-bullying through social media). Peter et al. (2021) reported that students encounter transphobic, biphobic, and homophobic words and phrases on a weekly basis at the very least and it is widespread. Nonetheless, there exists significant untapped unity among students, as most cisgender heterosexual participants expressed being disturbed to some extent by the presence of homophobic discourse within their school (Peter et al., 2021).

The risk amongst LGBTQ+ students of being victimized is very high. In U.S. schools, the bullying of LGBTQ+ students often entails physical attacks, verbal harassment, and homophobic slurs. Even institutional practices and school organizations can cause LGBTQ+ students to be discriminated against. For example, if the school does not allow students to form “gay straight alliances” or pride clubs, the school district can cultivate a culture that will encourage discrimination/bullying amongst students (Peguero, 2012).

The bullying faced by LGBTQ+ students has far reaching consequences with respect to wellbeing. In comparison to heterosexual youth, sexual minority youth have been found to have higher rates of substance use, suicidality, social isolation and victimization, regardless of race, gender, and age (Button et al., 2012), and are less likely to receive parental support. Further, the study results demonstrate the importance of social support, as it is correlated with decreased substance use, victimization and suicidality for youth of any sexual identity (Button et al., 2012). These issues are further analyzed in my research as I not only asked participants about the challenges that they have experienced in their lives, but also examined the level of support they received from others around them.
Increased social support is correlated with decreased victimization and suicidality. Therefore, it is necessary to create school policies and programs that foster supportive social connections, especially for youth populations that experience increased rates of victimizations, such as LGBTQ+ youth. A meta-analysis drawing from 55 studies representing over 400,000 individual cases throughout 6 nations (Canada, the Netherlands, Belgium, Northern Ireland, United States, and Guam) found LGBTQ identification to be a consistent and moderate risk factor for victimization at school (Myers et al., 2020). Amongst LGBTQ identified students at school, transgender individuals were found to be most likely to be victimized, and those questioning their gender or sexual identity were less likely to be victimized. Myers et al. (2020) posit that the prejudicial beliefs and cultural biases surrounding an LGBTQ identity is what puts those students at risk.

**Intersection of Autistic and LGBTQ+ Identity**

There is a substantial amount of research on the correlation between being diagnosed with autism, experiencing same-sex attraction, as well as being gender diverse. Findings from Dewinter et al.’s study (2017) from the Netherlands report that compared to a control group, non-heterosexual attraction is more common amongst adults and adolescents with autism. Furthermore, a significant number of autistic individuals indicated that they did not have sexual attraction towards men or women compared to the control group, which could reflect an absence of sexual attraction, limited knowledge of sexual orientation, or feelings of doubt (Dewinter et al., 2017).

Besides sexual orientation, studies have found that compared to the general population, an increased number of autistic individuals (especially those assigned female at birth) have a gender identity different from their assigned one (Brunissen et al., 2020; Dewinter et al., 2017;
George & Stokes, 2018; van der Miesen et al., 2018). A 2020 study that surveyed 163 parents of autistic youth aged 6 to 21 indicated a high rate of childhood cross-gendered behaviours, as well as androgynous or masculine mannerisms and appearances in females on the autism spectrum (Brunissen et al., 2020).

The intersection of an autistic and LGBTQ+ identity was a focal point in Hillier et al.’s (2020) U.S.-based qualitative study. They discussed how participants felt a sense of isolation/rejection from the autism community due to their gender identity and/or sexuality, as well as from the LGBTQ+ community because of their autism-related traits. Hillier et al. (2020) also made note that as youth increasingly use social media platforms to seek community, having in-person community-based support groups included would be valuable in filling their need for social connection and support. A limitation of the above studies that the current study addresses is the safety of LGBTQ+ autistic students, as well as their experiences of affirmation in the secondary school context.

Current scholarship demonstrates that it is common for autistic youth to identify as genders other than cisgender and sexualities other than heterosexual, as well as the importance of hearing the experiences and amplifying the voice of this understudied population. Most articles in the literature review discussed above were quantitative and surveyed large numbers of LGBTQ+ youth and LGBTQ+ autistic youth (Brunissen et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2019; Button et al., 2012; Dewinter et al., 2017; George & Stokes, 2018; Myers et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2021; van der Miesen et al., 2018). While there is a considerable amount of quantitative research exploring the number of autistic people who identify as LGBTQ+, there is very little qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of this population (Cooper et al., 2021b; Hillier et al., 2020), especially in the secondary school context. The existing qualitative research reports on the
challenges associated with being both LGBTQ+ and autistic in terms of mental health, experiencing multiple minority identity stressors, as well as a lack of recognition and support. These studies indicate a serious need for improved understanding, tailored interventions, and support from professionals. This is especially the case when it comes to gender-diverse autistic youth as they currently face many barriers when accessing gender-affirming care (Cooper et al., 2021b; Hillier et al., 2020). Though these qualitative studies are from the U.S., they offer the potential to be transferable to Canadian social work contexts, particularly in terms of how they have similar concepts of identity (such as autism and transgender identities), school systems (K-12), and mental health support structures.

Additionally, most articles in this literature review were not conducted from a critical lens, nor did they focus on the peer relationships (specifically the positive aspects of interaction) and peer victimization experiences at secondary institutions and the impacts on LGBTQ+-identifying autistic adolescents/young adults from their perspective (Beck et al., 2023; Brunissen et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2019; Button et al., 2012; Cooper et al., 2021b; Dewinter et al., 2017; Forrest et al., 2020; Gentry et al., 2015; George & Stokes, 2018; Hillier et al., 2020; Kahle & Peguero, 2017; Myers et al., 2020; Peguero, 2012; Peter et al., 2021; Popp & Peguero, 2011; Strauss et al., 2021; van der Miesen et al., 2018). The current research aims to fill a gap in the literature through highlighting the unique relational experiences of Canadian LGBTQ+ autistic youth while in secondary institutions, both negative and positive experiences, and finding ways in which they can be better supported. This study is important because autistic individuals have been found to be at risk of bullying, especially verbal bullying, due to difficulty in comprehending others' behaviours and in developing neurotypical social interactions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Forrest et al., 2020; Gentry et al., 2015; Maiano et al., 2015).
Furthermore, autistic traits have been found to be associated with factors that increase risk of suicide, including perceived burdensomeness, depression, and thwarted belonging (Pelton & Cassidy, 2017).

**Research Questions**

My research questions are as follows: (1) What are the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth on the autism spectrum in Canadian secondary institutions as it relates to interactions with peers (affirmatory and discriminatory)? (2) How do such experiences shape identity, safety, mental health, social belonging, and well-being? (3) In what ways do the positive peer interactions contribute to the resilience, wellbeing, and identity, specifically feelings of social belonging and mental health of these youth?

These research questions allow for an examination of various aspects of peer relationships (not only the negative aspects) and their impact on the identity, mental health, social belonging, and well-being of this population. This current study sheds a new light onto the experiences of autistic Canadian LGBTQ+ youth in secondary school from a critical lens, which I will be discussing below.

**Theoretical Framework/Orientation**

The following section discusses the theories/theoretical concepts that have influenced my writing and analysis. I discuss the concept of epistemological paradigms, specifically, constructivism and critical theory, which are the paradigms in which I conducted my study. The main theoretical frameworks used in this study are intersectionality and neurodiversity.

**Epistemological Paradigms**

Epistemological paradigms pertain to the origins of knowledge, and they are important to consider in research because they can broadly shape how data is interpreted and presented.
Constructivism purports that knowledge is co-constructed through the interactions of the participant’s and the researcher’s differing realities, and is historically, culturally, and contextually situated (Finlay, 1998; McNeil, 2021; Wahyuni, 2012). Critical theory asserts that the production of knowledge is shaped by many factors including history, politics, gender, ethnic, and economic values which cause inequitable relations of power, involving domination and subordination (McNeil, 2021).

Constructivism and critical theory are the two main epistemological paradigms that align with how I personally and currently view knowledge and ‘how I know what I know’. I understand knowledge to be constructed largely through social interactions and social conditioning imposed upon us, and I also view these constructions to be situated in networks of power and privilege we are all implicated within. In this study, constructivism has allowed me to focus on the micro-level and pay attention to the language each person used and the meaning attached to their constructions of reality (Martinez-Brawley, 2020). Meanwhile, a critical paradigm has allowed for an analysis of power inherent to micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Further, my constructivist and critical epistemological leanings have informed my research investigation by allowing me to focus on the process and interconnections between myself and the participants while taking cultural context and power differentials into account (McNeil, 2021).

Neurodiversity

The term ‘neurodiversity’ (also known as neurodivergent) has been increasingly applied in recent years to describe individuals presenting with neurological differences, such as those on the autism spectrum, those with epilepsy, traumatic brain injury, dyslexia, ADHD, etc., and it stems from the social model of disability (Haney, 2018). The social model of disability focuses on the
social processes and structures (e.g., the lack of accommodation in areas of life such as employment) that exclude and disadvantage individuals with impairments (Foster & Wass, 2012). This broad label of “neurodivergent” essentially implies that those that choose to identify with this label commonly view themselves as falling outside of the neurocognitive functioning style contained within a culture’s dominant social norms, i.e., they are not “neurotypical” (Strand, 2017). Research has found a connection between the perception of autism as a positive identity and an awareness of the concept of neurodiversity, and that reframing autism in a positive manner assists autistic individuals and parents of individuals on the autism spectrum to cope (Kapp et al., 2013). Autistic self-advocates may differ in preferences of how they self-identify, for instance, some prefer person-first language such as ‘person with autism’/’person on the autism spectrum’ and some prefer identity-first language such as ‘autistic person’ (Haney, 2018). Thus, in the current study, I have used both person-first and identity-first language.

**Intersectionality**

Power relations and socio-cultural contexts are key concerns for the theory of intersectionality. Legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1991, in the context of addressing violence against women of colour. Crenshaw explained how experiences of Black women were not being adequately represented within antiracist or feminist discourses resulting in systemic marginalization for women of colour in Black movements and in women’s movements in the United States, juxtaposing identity politics with this new intersectional view. While identity politics has led to solidarity and in turn social justice achievements, the issue with identity politics is that differences within the identity group tend to be neglected or conflated, rather than delved into. For instance, before Black feminist movements, feminism was overly focused on issues that concerned white women, leaving Black
women feeling marginalized within that space. Therefore, if differences within the group are ignored, it can lead to friction. Furthermore, Crenshaw discussed how women of colour are often the most economically and socially marginalized, and that those women who are immigrants, experiencing poverty and language barriers are those that are more susceptible to violence. The construct of intersectionality was further developed by numerous advocates of Black feminism. Crenshaw (1991) used the intersection of race and gender as an example to highlight the necessity of discourses about our social milieu to take multiple aspects of identity and associated power into consideration.

Intersectionality further developed into focusing on the disadvantage and privilege associated with categories of difference that interact and overlap. These newer definitions go beyond just race, gender and class, to include sexual orientation, sex, religion, age, marital status, mental health status, occupation, nationality, physical ability, income, socioeconomic status, immigration status, height and weight assessments, body type, education “and other naturalized – though not necessarily natural – ways of categorizing human populations” (Gopaldas, 2013, p. 91). This broadened definitional scope of intersectionality, which encompasses everyone’s social identity structures insinuates the distinct social privileges and disadvantages warrant investigation. Moreover, “everyone” encompasses not solely those experiencing multiple layers of oppression (e.g., a transgender, autistic, Black lesbian woman), but also those who are benefitting from multiple layers of privilege (e.g., White, Christian, cisgender, financially secure, heterosexual male) (Gopaldas, 2013).

Intersectionality is a means of analyzing the people and the world’s complexity, challenging binaries, and is centred around how social categories “symbiotically reinforce one another to produce marginalized subjects” (Okolosie, 2014, p. 90). Intersectional research seeks
to reveal the structural and historical mechanisms of domination by asking questions such as what legal, economic, political, and cultural forces led to the emergence of the present forms of subjugation, as well as which structural mechanisms perpetuate and uphold the existing situation (Gopaldas, 2013).

In this study, intersectionality is a useful theoretical framework since it stays cognizant of the complex and fluid nature of people’s identities within their socio-political contexts, thus not attempting to reduce participant’s experiences. During data collection and analysis, I aimed to understand the intersecting identities together, as without using an intersectional lens, I could have succumbed to only viewing the LGBTQ+ and the autism identities as separate, which would fail to acknowledge a person’s full identity, and the interactions between aspects of their identity.

Methods

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of six LGBTQ+ autistic youth in Ontario, aged 17-22 who have attended secondary school (grades nine to twelve) in Canada. Participants were recruited through availability (convenience) sampling (Engel & Schutt, 2017) by emailing Canadian community organizations/non-profits (e.g., Autism Ontario, Autism Canada, PFlag, Spectrum, etc.) that support LGBTQ+ and/or autistic individuals. Additionally, participants were recruited by word of mouth and through Facebook posts in Canadian autism and LGBTQ+ organizations/groups. A Facebook account was created for the purpose of this research, and no participants were added as Facebook friends to decrease the chance of any blurred boundaries (Engel & Schutt, 2017). To address literacy issues, easy to read posters and ads that did not contain complex jargon were created. Lastly, I strived to ensure the poster’s accessibility through
consulting with the Accessible Learning Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University. The following demographic table (i.e., Table 1) is based on participants’ language used in interviews and contains pseudonyms rather than real names. When conducting this research, I referred to participants in their preferred terms of identification, rather than imposing a label upon them. When participants were asked about their identities at the beginning of each interview, not all participants stated their race. Two participants identified as white, and one participant identified as Asian. It is a limitation of this study that race is not included in the demographic table.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Table*

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Disability/Mental Health Diagnosis</th>
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<td>ASD and ADHD</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Not sure</td>
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Methodology

My research methodology was a qualitative approach, which allowed the obtainment of in-depth data, and a reduction in an oversimplification of participant experiences. After receiving informed consent from participants, I collected data by conducting individual Zoom interviews using a semi-structured, receptive interviewing format. I provided the option of meeting on Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and all participants were fine with meeting over Zoom. Two main reasons why I chose to use Zoom and Teams is because they have a chat function, and they enabled individuals to participate throughout Canada. Interview durations were about 40 minutes up to one hour. Each interview was recorded on Zoom and through a digital recorder to account for technological difficulties, and the call-in feature on Zoom and Microsoft Teams was presented as an option to participants if their internet connection was not working well.

During interviews, each participant shared their experiences verbally or through the chat function (instant messaging where they could type out their message) on Zoom. Participants were given the option to respond through the chat function because recent research has found that many individuals on the autism spectrum prefer written online communication with people they do not know very well (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021). Furthermore, the semi-structured method, and the options of verbal and written communications allowed me to ask participants clarifying questions, receive in-depth answers, while still respecting preferences to ensure accessibility. All data was safely stored on my Laurier OneDrive and will be erased after 7 years. My thesis supervisor has access to anonymized data for the purposes of assisting with the thesis project. For participating in the interview, participants were offered a $25.00 gift card from Amazon within 3 days of completing the interview.
Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), and interviews were all transcribed by this writer. Data transcription was done through listening to the recordings, typing them out in a document, and anonymizing the data by excluding participants’ names and identifying information. After transcribing the data, I listened to the recordings and read over each transcription to become more familiar with the data and began to annotate the transcript by highlighting salient parts of the text, underlining, and attaching comments on the side of the document. Following Braun and Clarke (2012), I asked myself questions such as “How does this participant make sense of their experiences? What assumptions do they make in interpreting their experience? What kind of world is revealed through their accounts?” (p. 61). Further, I have been reflexive through asking myself how I am possibly influencing the participants’ responses and how I influence the analysis (Probst, 2015).

Subsequently, I generated codes for the data through delving into its implicit meanings and providing my interpretation. Once I reviewed all the participant interview transcripts and added codes for each of them, I compiled codes to generate broader themes and subthemes, created a description for each theme/subtheme, and thought about how the themes are interwoven yet can stand alone from each other. In this process, I re-read the dataset to also ensure the coherency and fit of the themes and subthemes into the overall dataset. The next step in the data analysis was selecting extracts from the participants’ interviews that provided a strong illustration of the themes/subthemes generated in analysis.

Member Reflections

To enhance the credibility and validity of this study, I engaged in the process of member reflections (Tracy, 2010), also known as member checking (Candela, 2019; Lietz & Zayas,
Member reflections were done as a group Zoom meeting, and an email option was offered. The process of member reflections better aligns with the social constructivist paradigm, since member checking as a label seems to imply that there is only one real reality (Tracy, 2010). Member reflections are important because they can empower and amplify the voices of this population, and it is one way to exemplify the concept of “nothing about us, without us” (Strang et al., 2018, p. 4050). The member reflections meeting involved presenting participants with a Canva PowerPoint that contained the key research themes, subthemes, their descriptions, and quotes that emerged from data analysis (see Key Findings section below).

Participants were given the chance to provide their feedback regarding what is missing, or what they think should be changed. Giving participants the option of participating in member reflections, allowed their perspectives to be more accurately represented. This part of the research did not involve honoraria, and the member reflection meeting was about one hour long. All participants indicated interest in the member reflections process on their consent forms, and they were contacted by email to set up a group member reflection meeting. Three participants replied to the email wanting to participate in member reflections, with one person indicating that they would like to participate in member reflections through an email response, which they did do. For the Zoom member reflections session, one participant attended, and the participant that was supposed to attend did not attend. In total, there were two participants that provided their feedback.

**Key Findings**

The themes that emerged from the study are: (1) discriminatory experiences with peers, (2) well-being, social belonging and safety of students at school, (3) ableism, cis-heteronormativity, and
the impact on identity, and (4) feeling affirmed with their identity. Additionally, several subthemes will be discussed under each theme below.

**Theme 1: Discriminatory experiences with peers**

Participants experienced challenges in relation to expressing their autistic LGBTQ+ identity. Some of the main obstacles were stereotyping and objectification by others. Stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community undeniably influenced the way that the participants’ peers treated them, and even impacted the organization of spirit week (i.e., celebration of LGBTQ+ people) in one participant’s school. For example, Ethan revealed that he noticed people organizing spirit week for pride month at their high school and that it did not fairly represent the LGBTQ+ community. He found that spirit week was based on gay stereotypes rather than adequately focusing on educating students in this following quote:

> for pride month, they did do like a spirit week thing, but it was all based on stereotypes, like none of it was actually, I don’t know, like it was, they had one day it was like um glitter and gold day, which you know it could have been great, but it was also coupled with like a flamboyant like pink stuff, like that, like a whole bunch of very gay stereotypes. There’s was nothing about like, oh even something simple like wear the colours of your flag, or wear a pronoun pin or something like that, or like even just fun days where they talked about the history on the announcements, or something like that I could have understood. But it was all just like stereotypes um and the there wasn’t as far as I was aware, um I did ask around about it, there was a teacher that I had had issues with that was planning this with students that were not part of the community. And it’s a
big thing for me when it comes to advocacy, is talking to the people that you’re trying to represent so like especially when it comes to autism.

Ethan’s quote demonstrates how his school’s spirit week planning committee reinforces a flamboyant gay stereotype. Ethan felt as if the school is providing a superficial spirit week event, as it over-simplifies the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community, channelled through gay stereotypes. Through Ethan’s account of the academic institution failing to consult members of the LGBTQ+ community for spirit week, he expresses feelings of resentment and lack of trust towards the institution, and the spirit week organizing committee.

• Subtheme: Experiences of objectification

Hayden experienced objectification from their peers after coming out as non-binary: “If I hadn’t come out, people wouldn’t have started treating me as this object to be taken a photo with. Like as soon as I came out, I was instantly objectified into the gay best friend of everyone, even though I’d never known many of them.” This quote illustrates the social challenges that Hayden experienced when coming out about their gender identity and living authentically. It appears that Hayden’s experience of objectification negatively influenced their ability to trust their peers and develop genuine friendships, as the quote insinuates Hayden’s doubting others’ intentions due to their sudden responsiveness/interest in Hayden. The negative impacts of objectification would likely be amplified for an autistic person when considering that one of the traits of autism is experiencing challenges in perceiving the perspective of others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This demonstrates the possible complex intersectional challenge of living out an authentic LGBTQ+ identity as an autistic person.
Hayden also experienced objectification in the context of their peers conflating gender and sexuality as they assumed that Hayden was gay, despite Hayden only coming out as non-binary. These peers labelled them as gay, as the gay identity was considered cool: “People I had never even met before were coming up to me and being like ‘oh my god, do you want to play truth or dare with my friends? Don’t kiss any of us though, we’re not into gay people.’ Like people thought that instantly because, like especially the female classmates thought that because I had come out as gay, which, I hadn’t, I had come out as non-binary.” Hayden’s female peers conflated Hayden’s non-binary identity with being gay/lesbian (sexually attracted to women), causing Hayden to feel objectified in those interactions. As this example suggests, certain identities challenge/trouble the notion of cis-heteronormativity and as a result, peers have a harder time accepting gender identities that deviate from the gender binary of male/female. In this example, the conflation of gender identity (i.e., non-binary) with sexual orientation (i.e., lesbian) showcases cis-heteronormativity since people are accustomed to thinking in terms of gender binaries. This can translate into lack of knowledge around identities that challenge cis-heteronormativity, which seems to lead to stereotyping. The stereotype that Hayden’s peers likely held about Hayden is that they are confused about their gender because of the peer’s lack of understanding of gender.

Hayden’s responses indicate the negative impacts that stereotyping and objectification of gender/sexuality have on someone on the autism spectrum, leading to frustration around self-construction and self-presentation to others. The sudden interest in Hayden from their school peers is questionable in intent, as the interest in Hayden was not regarding an identity that Hayden identifies with, leading to feelings of being misunderstood and objectified.

**Theme 2: Well-being, social belonging and safety of students at school**
This theme focuses mainly on participants’ well-being, perceptions of their personal safety and the safety of other LGBTQ+ students. Safety refers to being protected from physical, mental, and emotional harm, which greatly impacts one’s well-being. Transgender students are often vulnerable to peer victimization as Ethan reported that he experienced instances of physical bullying at one of his secondary schools. Even in supposedly safe spaces at school organized around inclusion, such as gay straight alliances (GSA), some students may feel unsafe. Two participants (Ethan and Isabelle) relayed that they did not feel safe in their high school’s pride club/GSA’s. Ethan reported that the club felt divided, that some students would attend the meetings to uncover which students identified as LGBTQ+ to target them later: “I think I tried the pride club at one point but it was, they had to let everyone in, which I understand, but there were people that would come in, sit at the back just so that they know which students are LGBT and then target them later, so it wasn’t safe.” Students sitting in the back of pride club and later targeting other students created a sense of unsafety, which would lead to Ethan feeling excluded in his school’s LGBTQ+ space. This demonstrates that while schools may have good intentions of inclusivity for all students, this does not always translate into reality.

Similarly, Isabelle’s account of her school’s effort to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ students echoes Ethan’s account of his school’s pride club being emotionally unsafe for LGBTQ+ students. Isabelle reported that the school tried hard to prevent bullying, and to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ people, which prevented physical bullying, but did not do enough in terms of creating a sense of emotional safety: “Our school was more informed about, about, you know queer life than other schools, especially in the area, especially at the time. But I don’t know if they were great at, cuz there was still only like one trans kid in our grade and he ended up leaving the school because it was still so rough for him, um so you know no points for execution, but the
effort was there.” Isabelle’s quote illustrates that mental and emotional harm was high as the only transgender kid left the school, and many of her peers only came out as LGBTQ+ after high school.

Conversely, Sidney reported feeling safe in their high school’s GSA, as there was a community of students who were also on the autism spectrum within the club. Sidney felt support and acceptance along their sexual orientation and gender identity journey while in secondary school within their school’s GSA club. Interestingly, Sidney noted that they felt safer in their high school than in the general public because they were supported by staff and peers.

As these examples indicate, safety at school is a contentious issue. Participants feel better and freer to explore their identity when they have teachers and/or peers that accept participant’s expression of themselves, even if that self-expression is on the margins of society’s main messaging around being “normal.” While Sidney felt safe at their school as an LGBTQ+ individual, both Ethan and Isabelle’s quotes demonstrates a lack of effort and trust for the institution based on a lack of safety protocols, including in GSAs, and superficial progressiveness towards LGBTQ+ students. However, as these examples and the following subtheme clearly show, a student’s perceived sense of safety has an identifiable impact on well-being.

• **Subtheme: Negative mental health experiences**

  Negative mental health experiences are connected to a lack of safety and support in youth’s environment. Interviews of the six LGBTQ+ autistic participants revealed how most participants had co-occurring disability and/or mental health/developmental diagnoses. Five out of six participants had a mental health/developmental or physical disability diagnosis, outside of
their autism diagnosis. For Morgan, feeling unsupported and insecure about their mental health while in high school was compounded by their unawareness of their LGBTQ+ and autistic identity at the time. Maria discussed struggling with self-harm throughout high school. Maria recounted instances where important people in her life such as her parents and friends supported her in not self-harming and how it helps her cope: “they supported me when I wanted to self-harm, because self-harm is higher with people with a disability or ASD specifically I guess. They helped me uh not do that so I guess teaching me different ways to cope.” Maria’s quote highlights her mental health struggles and the value of having a support system.

On the other hand, Isabelle discussed how her self-perception and self-esteem were affected by abusive peers in her environment who would encourage self-destructive behaviours: “I developed an addiction to pain killers and um I also developed an eating disorder, and a lot of the people in my life that were from the dance world were encouraging of those like self-destructive behaviors…just like some really abusive people that really messed with my self-esteem and self-perception, kinda made me feel like I was not like worthy of being in relationships and stuff, platonic or otherwise.” While Isabelle was not out as LGBTQ+ in high school, she knew she was different because of her autism and physical disability, which contributed to her worry around others:

it seemed that there was a certain demographic of people who were victims of this, like 150 percent more than everyone else and they were all people um that were, they were being discriminated against for some sort of like other ‘ism’ that they have. So like all of the queer kids definitely were in the higher rate of victimhood, disabled, um you know, socially inept people [sic] – pointing to myself, like um all of the, it was never really an
outright thing, it was all more like subterfuge stuff, like oh you just don’t get invited to this get-together that’s happening that everyone else is going to. Oh, you just suspiciously didn’t get that email of the practice we’re supposed to have. Oh weird like you heard your name somebody else whispering behind you. Like that’s what most of it was, but it made me a much more paranoid person now.

This quote illustrates the pervasive nature of heterosexism, transphobia, and ableism, and shows how Isabelle’s mental health was negatively impacted by these forms of discrimination. Isabelle mentioned that these experiences at school have made her a much more paranoid person. These mental health challenges of feeling paranoid are likely heightened through autism (Pinkham et al., 2012). Similarly, Ethan explains how he felt worried and a sense of anxiety when interacting with others: “I can’t remember the specifics but it was just a lot of misgendering and just kind of people…weren’t friendly, um, a lot of it had to do with the autism, like I kind of say, I have trouble with interacting with people, I’m always worried I might say something weird or something like that and then I get teased for it, but not in a nice way.” Ethan’s account highlights the challenge of experiencing others’ misgendering of him, in addition to teasing that comes from others’ misunderstandings of Ethan’s social interactions and/or intolerance of Ethan’s autism. The misgendering and teasing create a sense of worry in social situations due to others’ reactions to his autism.

The participants’ experiences indicate that lack of safety, well-being and social belonging in the secondary institution negatively impact mental health. More specifically, impacts are felt in terms of increases in levels of anxiety and less helpful ways of coping (i.e., addiction, eating disorder, self-harm).
Theme 3: Ableism, cis-heteronormativity, and the impact on identity

This theme outlines how normative perspectives and practices about gender, sexuality, and/or disability/autism attempt to push ideals of normalcy, rooted in ableism and cis-heteronormativity on the participants. One way this is exemplified is through not respecting participants’ preferred identity labels. For instance, Hayden dealt with someone in a hospital setting not respecting their preferred language for identifying their autism, as well as their family member not respecting their pronouns: “when I came out as non-binary, she [mother] said ‘I don’t know why you can’t just pick normal pronouns. I gave you these pronouns, why aren’t you happy with them?’” This quote depicts a stark reality of living in a cis-heteronormative society that sends the message to people that “they/them” pronouns are not normal, therefore are undesired, despite gender being a socially constructed category. These findings depict a contrast to the framework of neurodiversity and critical autism studies, as neurodiversity seeks to challenge the deficit-oriented view of autism that sees the autistic person and their autism as a “problem.” Rather, neurodiversity celebrates autism as a facet human diversity rather than seeing it as something in need of curing. These perspectives are translatable to gender diversity, as being non-binary is part of the richness of human experience, however, this participant’s family member unfortunately does not seem to view gender in this way and sees it as a problem and abnormal.

Another participant, Sidney, discussed how their current workplace is quite affirming of their gender identity. However, when working at a different previous job as a cashier at the beginning of secondary school, Sidney opted not to have their pronouns on their nametag because their pronouns brought about instances where people would be rude/discriminatory,
which became exhausting. Sidney noticed that they were treated much better at their work when they did not have their pronouns on their name tag and wore make-up (appearing more feminine). Receiving better treatment from others after conforming to traditionally feminine actions such as wearing make-up can be seen as a form of gender policing. Other non-binary participants did not specifically note a sense of exhaustion regarding living in a binarily gendered world; however, our society is not structurally built for individuals that identify outside of the gender binary of male or female, which would understandably lead to exhaustion.

Sidney outlined their experience as a non-binary individual on their high school swim team and that they needed to be on the girl’s swim team due to their small physique. Sidney discussed being a non-binary student on the girl’s swim team “was a lot more confusing for the adults involved and my peers”, and how they felt sad and excluded when their swim instructor would say “alright girls get in the water”.

Similar to Sidney, who experienced a form of identity/gender policing by a swim instructor, Isabelle felt identity policing/stereotyping in terms of her sexual orientation. Isabelle reported that the asexuality label made sense to her, however, she was told that she would grow out of asexuality so many times that she felt she was not allowed to identify with this sexual orientation:

I learned about asexuality for the first time in grade 9, like right at the beginning of high school and I was pretty much right away after learning about that I was like uh that makes way more sense than you know everything else. Um I still didn’t feel like this is a label or an identity that I didn’t want to take on because I was being told on like all sides that I
would grow out of that and I just had to find somebody and not be like afraid of sex or relationships or whatever and then I would stop feeling that way.

Isabelle’s quote demonstrates others’ understanding of asexuality is limited, as they think asexuality is a temporary phase that one will pass through.

Isabelle experienced identity policing/stereotyping not only with her sexual orientation, but also in the context of her autism through microaggressions: “I’ve heard like ‘oh you don’t look autistic’ so many times. Or at this point I just wanna be like what, what does that look like, I’m so confused. Cuz so many people have this idea that they’re like ‘you don’t look autistic’ and I’m like I’m so genuinely curious as to what the hell that’s supposed to mean.” This quote demonstrates that Isabelle experiences microaggressions related to her autism. The statement “you don’t look autistic”, may be well-intentioned on the part of the speaker, though it is still harmful to the autistic person, especially when they hear this statement more than once. This statement conveys misinformation that all autistic people look or behave a certain way, contrasting with the way non-autistic people look. Furthermore, the statement essentially dismisses Isabelle’s lived experience of being autistic and would leave Isabelle feeling misunderstood and othered by mainstream society and potentially excluded from the autism community.

Akin to Isabelle’s invalidation related to her autism, she also experienced invalidation by others in the context of her physical disability: “I have like a lot of invisible disabilities so especially like I have a handicap parking pass and people always get mad at me when I get out of the car and I’m like I’m disabled, how do you think I got that pass - I didn’t just steal it from someone, um, people get really mad.” This quote implies that when a physical disability is
invisible, others question it and by doing so they would elicit feelings of frustration on the part of
the disabled person because of the invalidation of the disability. Isabelle’s account of others’
reactions to her disabilities conveys that others do not have an adequate understanding of the
nature of disability, and they view her as what society considers to be “normal” (heterosexual,
non-autistic, non-disabled) as they do not visibly see any disability, and they consider asexuality
to be a phase that is grown out of.

Hayden, Isabelle, and Sidney’s accounts suggest that identities (non-binary, asexuality) that
challenge others’ ideas of “normal” are stigmatized, surveilled, and policed. This reveals an
ableist/cis-heteronormative reality, which is why it is so important for LGBTQ+ autistic youth to
feel affirmed through connecting with others with similar identities.

Theme 4: Feeling affirmed with their identity

There have been many instances where participants felt affirmed in their identity. These
feeling of affirmation included when Ethan connected with others with disabilities and/or autism
in person (through his disability club), as well as when Hayden and Isabelle connected with
others who have similar interests in an online space. This also included times when others asked
Hayden for their pronouns rather than assuming and adjusted their language, as well as when
others apologized to Hayden for misgendering them: “All the times that people apologized for
misgendering me – I feel really affirmed because I can see that they’re putting in this effort and
it’s paying off.” Hayden’s quote expresses the enthusiasm present when others simply
acknowledge when they’ve made a mistake with Hayden’s pronouns. In a way, this action of
apologizing for misgendering Hayden communicates to Hayden that their gender identity is valid
and accepted.
Sidney shared an instance of affirmation when their peers stood up for them and their gender identity in front of staff. When Sidney’s swim instructor or pool staff used the pronoun “she” to refer to Sidney, their peers would be blunt by purposely repeating the sentence with the pronoun “they” in it (referring to Sidney), until it was recognized by the speaker. This is a positive example demonstrating that Sidney’s peers helped Sidney normalize their non-binary identity towards staff, and those peers effectively corrected the staff member (i.e., policed their pronoun use in a positive way). Sidney felt affirmed in these instances when their peers stood up for them in front of staff. In contrast to this experience with staff on the girl’s swim team, Sidney also made note of how they joined another co-ed swim team, where they noticed their swim instructor using non-gendered language (i.e., “ok people on the left go in the pool, and people on the right go in the pool”). Sidney’s experience illustrates that co-ed sports teams and instructors that use non-gendered language would help non-binary individuals feel less excluded.

Lastly, Hayden felt affirmed when their teacher and peers were cognizant of their special interest: “One of my special interests is also snakes and reptiles, and I do a snake fact of the day at school. And then one day, my peers came up to me and my teacher came up to me and said “(participant’s name), we know you really like snakes so we got a surprise for you”, and they got me a little locket with that I can put a piece of my pet snake’s shed in to keep him with me.” Hayden’s quote demonstrates the care and consideration their current teacher and peers show towards them, which is perceived by Hayden as affirming towards their autistic identity, allowing Hayden to experience a sense of belonging through others’ attentiveness to their special interest.

• Subtheme: Sense of understanding amongst individuals with similar identity facets
The pressure to conform with societal expectations of normalcy juxtaposes with feeling a sense of understanding, which can be seen in Ethan’s reporting of the valuing of his perspective and the perspectives of other disabled peers in the disability club he is a part of. Ethan noted that when speaking to others who are on the autism spectrum, he feels less worried about being judged for being autistic, and he seldom fixates on the genuineness of the conversation: “I find it easier to talk to other people that are autistic or have like a disability because it’s all the time they’re less likely to judge me for it, and especially with other autistic people, I don’t have to worry about if they mean what they’re saying. It’s just, like I know that chances are, if they say they like my haircut, they actually do.” Ethan’s quote portrays a sense of relief, as he does not have to guess the meaning of other autistic people’s communication towards him, compared to when he has talked to non-autistic people. Feeling less worried would also translate into improved mental well-being.

Two other participants (Hayden and Sidney) discussed how they have one or more neurodivergent sibling(s), and they feel that they understand what each other is going through. Hayden recounts: “because there’s so many neurodivergent people at home, it’s a little more understanding. Like everyone kinda gets what each other’s going through.” Hayden’s quote demonstrates a sense of validation obtained from other neurodivergent family/peers.

Lastly, Isabelle’s quote highlights the importance of having other LGBTQ+ people and other autistic and/or disabled connections in her life who adequately understand those identity facets, and view them as normal, rather than strange:

It's nice to have other people who understand. Cuz like I can talk to straight or like non-disabled people who’ve been bullied but it’s not really the same um cuz there is this like,
there’s this real like confusion and helplessness that everything kind of clicks into place once you can put a name to it, like oh I am disabled, I am queer, let me find other people who, for whom this is also normal. So it didn’t take until like this year to admit to myself that like being queer is a normal thing, it’s not a weird strange, you know, thing that I should be ashamed of and uh I absolutely find the strength in like other people saying oh I went through the same thing, lets fix that together now.

Isabelle’s quote illustrates the refreshing nature of being surrounded by people who understand parts of her experience because they’ve been through similar experiences of victimization due to their identity (discrimination). Furthermore, it shows that Isabelle has found more self-acceptance through talking to others with similar identity facets.

Ethan, Hayden, Isabelle and Sidney’s accounts of being around and connecting with others with similar identity facets highlights the importance of mutual understanding and acceptance within communities of similar identity facets. This would contribute positively to their sense of well-being and personal resilience.

• **Subtheme: Processing bullying experience through advocacy and supporting peers/community members**

Most participants (four out of six – Isabelle, Sidney, Maria, and Ethan), spoke about how they are currently in a role that supports others who experience similar challenges to them. Ethan started a disability club in his high school. The other three participants became involved in initiatives after high school, including public speaking about gender, speaking about mental health in a youth facilitation role, and working in an advocacy role.
Sidney described how during secondary school and currently, they have held a few different positions in their community related to educating students and teachers on pronouns and creating programming for other LGBTQ+ students. One of these positions was prompted by one of Sidney’s teachers seeing them as having a gift and passion for working with other youth. Another leadership position Sidney held was in an LGBTQ+ camp: “We worked together yeah to create camps and we also did, we started working on a few other things before Covid hit uh when it came to like doing more with the schools cause that was more my passion of working with, I wanted to do more specific with the Catholic schools and creating programs for LGBT students who may not feel safe in the Catholic schools.” Sidney’s quote reflects a genuine concern for youth to feel safe, especially in the Catholic school setting, likely because Sidney went to Catholic school.

In some participants’ experiences with assisting others in their community, there is an element of peer mentorship/peer support. For instance, Isabelle talked about the challenging experiences that she went through, and stated: “I can’t really change those things now so I am just going to use them as examples for other people who are like in high school and they look up at me and they’re like, I think I’m dying because of what I’m going through um and you know I can say, I felt that way too but I’m you know not dead, I’m still here, which means that you can too.” Isabelle’s quote showcases the painfulness of her high school experience, as she refers to thinking she’s dying. Even though Isabelle suffered through mental health challenges in high school due to negative people in her environment (as outlined in a previous theme), it appears that she has found a way to cope with these negative experiences in helping others.

As seen, most participants discussed the roles they occupy that support and advocate for others who experience similar challenges to them. The participants’ stories showcased not only
processing of bullying and mental health experiences through connecting with others, but their commitment and passion to drive positive change in their communities.

Discussion & Implications for Social Work

The findings of this study presented in the themes and subthemes demonstrate that participants experienced mental health and identity struggles related to environmental emotional safety concerns, alongside many stereotypes and negative reactions to the self-expression of LGBTQ+ autistic identity that could be viewed as obstacles to authentic self-expression. Even when bullying is not explicit in a physical form, the emotional harm that participants absorb through verbal bullying, or even through living in a cis-heteronormative, ableist environment/society still can greatly impact participants’ mental health and can create distance from feeling like they belong. Lastly, participants’ experiences of affirmation emerged from the processing of bullying experience through occupying leadership positions or connecting with others in similar communities, such as other neurodivergent individuals.

From reflecting on the key themes described above, it is clear that participants want to feel safe and accepted around their peers, like most other people. Acceptance from peers and family members can not only decrease self-harm, but also can enhance self-perception, confidence and self-esteem for LGBTQ+ individuals (Williams et al., 2023). Even though many parents have good intentions of keeping their children and youth safe, their words and actions/inactions may contradict these intentions. Johnson et al. (2020) discussed how transgender adolescents experience and perceive their parents’ rejecting and supportive behaviours. These authors found that even when parents have good intentions, often driven by concern for safety and care for their child’s well-being, transgender youth still could view their parents’ actions as rejecting, which could therefore have detrimental consequences on their
emotional wellness. An example of an action that has negative impacts, despite the possibility of good intentions which could cause emotional distress is parental rejection of pronouns. While some transgender and/or non-binary participants felt like their family accepted their new pronouns, others experienced more rejecting responses from one of their family members. For instance, Hayden experienced pushback from a parent when Hayden chose to use they/them pronouns when they came out as non-binary. While I could not locate any literature specifically on parental motivations for pronoun rejection, especially in the context of non-binary identities, Johnson et al.’s (2020) study on rejecting behaviours sheds light on how good intentions can have negative outcomes. For parents of non-binary individuals, the intentions behind rejecting pronouns may not be malicious, as they might want to protect their child from discrimination, however, this action can still be emotionally harmful, affecting their child’s mental health. These findings are important, especially when thinking about how family acceptance serves as the most influential factor in promoting a sense of comfort and positive self-esteem for LGBTQ+ youth and could assist in preventing and even decrease self-harm (Williams et al., 2023).

Stereotypes encompass a collection of traits believed to capture the fundamental nature of a particular group of people, and are disseminated through language and discourse, media exposure, and socialization in general. Stereotypes stemming from an oversimplified view of a group are often rooted in and reinforced by discrimination, and can lead to objectification, which is defined treating a person as if they are an object (Dovidio et al., 2010; Paasonen et al., 2020). In the current study’s findings, Ethan’s school spirit week was full of stereotypes rather than education, and Hayden felt objectified by their female peers conflating their gender identity with their sexual orientation. Though I could not find relevant studies on stereotypes of non-binary individuals, or conflation of sexual orientation with being non-binary, one U.S. qualitative study
found that conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity was a common experience for transgender and gender nonconforming adults. More specifically, that study was mainly composed of 45 transgender or gender nonconforming individuals, and it was found that they experienced homophobic transphobia from others, felt pressure by others to conform to heteronormative gender roles, and felt a dual stigma around gender identity and sexuality that discouraged sexual minority and gender minority individuals from revealing both of those identities, to avoid experiencing multiple layers of stigma (Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). In the current study, Hayden experienced conflation of gender and sexual orientation, and experienced something similar to what Mizock and Hopwood (2016) described as homophobic transphobia from their peers, as they defined this concept as “the occurrence of gender-based stigma toward transgender and gender nonconforming individuals due to misperceiving the person to be gay or lesbian” (Results section, paragraph 3). This shows that there is a lack of awareness of gender diversity that can lead to gender policing in the form of homophobic transphobia.

There are various challenges of identifying as non-binary in a binary-gendered world, especially with pressures of conformity, ignorance, and structural issues leading to emotional exhaustion. Albeit limited research on non-binary identities exists, one study discussed how non-binary individuals find it emotionally exhausting living in a binarily gendered world, as they experience having to explain their non-binary identity to cisgender individuals who do not understand the concept of non-binary to be energy and time consuming (Barbee & Schrock, 2019). As seen in the current study, Sidney described instances of others being rude/discriminatory when their non-binary gender identity was made apparent by their name tag, which they described as exhausting.
Many aspects of secondary institutions rely/have been built upon binaries of sex and gender, for instance, girls and boys locker rooms and sports teams, as was discussed by Sidney when they shared their experiences on their swim team. This highlights the significance of school policy that is inclusive of transgender/non-binary individuals (Shelton et al., 2021). There’s a lack of research of non-binary individuals’ experiences with sports teams in secondary school, however, one study examined north American campus recreation staff’s perception of transgender and non-binary student inclusivity in college campus recreation (Wilson et al., 2023). This study found that there was a higher perception of inclusivity at institutions that had all gender washrooms/locker rooms, as well as at institutions that had antiharassment/antidiscrimination policies. The current study also adds to the conversation of inclusivity in education institutions, and more specifically highlights how having co-ed sports teams and staff that are educated on gender diversity in secondary institutions would increase inclusivity for non-binary individuals, as shown through Sidney’s experience of being on swim teams as a non-binary student.

The participants’ stories reveal that resilience, meritocracy, and oppression are interrelated. With respect to the theme of “Feeling affirmed with their identity,” and the subtheme of “Processing bullying experience through advocacy and supporting peers/community members”, my natural reaction after listening to some participants is that they have shown great resilience. Resilience essentially is what allows people to adapt their life and overcome challenging or traumatic experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, when further delving into this thought of resilience, it becomes increasingly nuanced. Upon further contemplation, if the concept of resilience is over-emphasized, we may risk ignoring the structural and social factors that oppressed certain groups of people in the first
place (Reynolds, 2020). The over-emphasis of resilience connects to the concept of meritocracy, which proposes that one’s higher status and rewards are dependent on their ability and how hard they work for it. The social system of meritocracy fails to properly acknowledge the place that someone starts out in life. It excludes an adequate examination of how gender, class, race, religion, and other group membership influence one’s success. Instead, meritocracy masks social inequities by viewing individuals as accountable for their outcomes (failure/success) in life. Disabled individuals are oppressed in this system through implying that the person with the disability is the problem that needs to change, rather than the system or environment (Hernandez, 2021). Furthermore, this downplaying of the role of oppression can in turn romanticize people’s capacity to endure systemic oppression, while simultaneously injecting a medical model infused sense of blame and stigmatization into the veins of disabled individuals. Participants like Isabelle exemplify the power of harnessing past experiences to benefit others, while her advocacy work shows her awareness of issues of oppression.

**Implications**

The findings of the current study have several implications in the context of school and social work settings that are worth exploring. The implications include respecting someone’s pronouns/self-identification, implementing staff training and relevant anti-discriminatory policy at school, providing mentors and positive role models, and self-examination in the context of positionality, pathologization and political history.

At the micro level of social work practice, this research underscores the significance of allowing people to express their identity in their own way in terms of their identity, wellbeing, and safety. It is important to ask others for their pronouns, and after hearing someone’s pronouns, we need to consciously use the name and pronouns that the individual would like to be
addressed by, even if they are pronouns that we are not used to hearing. The same applies to other forms of identification, such as disability. An example of this is understanding that some individuals may identify as an autistic person, while others might prefer to say that they are a person who has autism. Ultimately, it is necessary to respect the way that others are expressing themselves.

Another practical implication of this research is for school administrators and policymakers to implement much needed staff training and policies. The current study implies the need for macro level interventions relating to school discrimination policies, as one participant who is transgender (Ethan) expressed that he experienced a high level of bullying at school. One Canadian research report (Taylor et al., 2015) found that educators from schools with homophobic harassment policies and schools with transphobic harassment policies (policies that gave school staff guidance on how to respond to incidents of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation/gender identity) were less likely to report hearing microaggressions (e.g., “that’s so gay” or negative comments about girls acting “too much like a boy”), compared to schools without those policies. Taylor et al.’s (2015) study also found that policy implementation was viewed as more successful in schools where it has been supported by comprehensive staff training, highlighting the need for both training and policy on discriminatory bullying/harassment. Social workers employed in the macro level could advocate for these policies that prevent mistreatment of minority groups, such as LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities.

Schools must increase policies and trainings in place that would address students’ emotional safety concerns, as adolescents are greatly shaped by these spaces given the amount of time they are expected to be there for. Some positive strides have been made for schools in
Ontario, as they are required to approve of GSA clubs, and it has been found that schools with GSAs have fewer incidences of victimization against LGBTQ+ students (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020). Despite this, in the current study, participants like Ethan and Isabelle did not feel safe in their school’s GSA, which shows that more needs to be done. Other initiatives that have been shown to foster positive school atmospheres for LGBTQ+ students include designing curricula that incorporates LGBTQ+ content, promoting training opportunities on gender identity and sexual orientation, employing supportive staff and educators, and implementing and enforcing rules against bullying/discrimination. Just as the current study demonstrated the link between an unsafe social environment and mental health impacts, other research has also found that feeling safety and belonging in one’s school environment are pivotal protective factors that can decrease the likelihood of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020).

In addition to having a GSA club, further initiatives should be taken at secondary institutions to improve students’ mental health, emotional safety, and connection. One way that safety and connection can be fostered is through providing youth with mentors and positive role models. As discussed in the findings, participants held positions that included elements of mentorship. These positions were not only fulfilling for the participants, but also helped other marginalized students. The benefits of mentorship has been confirmed by Mentor Canada’s (2022) survey of 2,838 Canadian young adults, which found that compared to respondents who did not have a mentor while growing up, those who had a mentor were more likely to report positive outcomes in young adulthood, such as good mental health, a sense of belonging in their local community, completion of high school, pursuing further education and/or being employed. The current study’s findings are significant because it demonstrates the possibility for peer
mentorship to be beneficial for both the mentor and the mentee, as it fosters a shared connection and can help in the processing of challenging experiences such as discrimination/peer victimization.

The findings of this research suggest that there is a need for increased protection for LGBTQ+ students against bullying, and a need for institutional support. In the current study, Sidney emphasized the significant role that their chaplain played in providing unwavering support as a trusted ally. Further, Sidney described an instance where a teacher used their previous name (i.e., their dead name), and luckily their chaplain and principle stood firmly in support of Sidney on the matter. For sexual minority youth, the most significant mentors during their adolescence included adult relatives, family friends, elders, teachers and other school staff members, however, Mentor Canada’s study (2022) found that more than 50% of LGBTQ+ youth encountered barriers in obtaining mentors during their teenage years, whereas only around 38% of all respondents faced similar barriers. Having social work staff fill mentoring roles in secondary schools would help LGBTQ+ students access the positive outcomes that Mentor Canada reported in their study.

Given the findings of the current study, it would be helpful for secondary institutions to establish and employ social workers or other professionals in roles such as an “LGBTQ+ educator and mentor” to assist students in forming a GSA if they do not have one already and offer emotional support to students in need, especially to those students that do not feel completely safe in their school’s GSA. In addition, this staff could provide a mandatory training to school staff (i.e., teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators) on issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, including strategies to intervene and prevent discriminatory bullying among students. By having someone in a position to adequately train educators, educators would
also be better equipped to support students as mentors or allies and properly educate students through LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculums.

This study contributes to the social work literature through identifying how experiences of bullying/discrimination and affirmation impact the mental health and identity of secondary school LGBTQ+ autistic youth. Specifically, it explores the necessary change that is needed in the education system for these youth to develop in a healthy way.

**Study Limitations & Future Directions**

While this study has strengths, it also has some limitations. It is a limitation that the sample size of this study was only six. A larger sample would have increased the scientific rigor and the depth of data of this study; however, due to time constraints in recruitment because of the nature of this master’s program, the sample size was limited to six. Furthermore, my study participants were not representative of all Canadian autistic LGBTQ+ youth, as all six participants were in Ontario, most participants were white, and there were no Two-spirit identifying youth. Furthermore, given the sample size, it was not possible for the participants to represent the diversity of 2SLGBTQ+ youth and to engage participants from throughout the country. While the open-ended nature of questions about identities in the interview allowed participants to self-identify and share identities salient to them, there could have been a more pointed question that would have asked participants about their racial identity.

I suggest that future researchers obtain participants from other provinces in Canada, and further examine how race and other positionalities (e.g., class) also factor into participants’ experiences with peer victimization. This study also excluded individuals who have not been formally diagnosed with autism. I am aware that there can be barriers in getting a diagnosis, and
this eligibility requirement must have been very frustrating for individuals who are facing barriers in this process and were therefore excluded from my study. Lastly, all participants indicated on their consent form that they would like to participate in the member reflections session, though only two participants did so. This limitation could have been caused by the focus group style of the member reflections session, as well as a lack of monetary incentive attached to it.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this current study examined the various types of interactions, including affirmative and discriminative/peer victimization experiences that autistic LGBTQ+ youth aged 17 to 22 had within their schools, their families, and others in their life. It also investigated how such positive and negative experiences shape the overall well-being, identity, mental health and social belonging of these youth. This study advanced LGBTQ+/autistic scholarship in Canada and is crucial because this population is often misunderstood by the general public, medical professionals, peers, teachers at school, social workers, and even close family members, which has led to stereotypes and bullying. I am hopeful that the more education and understanding there is about this population, the less stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination they will experience, which could translate into improved mental health, and other outcomes.
References


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Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching* (2nd ed.).


https://mentoringcanada.ca/sites/default/files/2022-08/The%20Mentoring%20Effect%202SLGBTQ%20Youth%20EN_new.pdf


Appendices

Appendix A: TCPS Certificate

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Brianna Comeau

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: 21 May, 2020
Appendix B: Ethics Approval Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>File No</th>
<th>Project Title</th>
<th>Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Application Type</th>
<th>Status Snapshot</th>
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<td>8262</td>
<td>Experiences of Peer Interaction Amongst Autistic 2SLGBTQ+ Youth in Secondary Institutions</td>
<td>Ms. Brianna Comeau (Faculty of Social Work)</td>
<td>Non-Psychology Applicants - Request for Human Ethics Review (Certification in Human Ethics)</td>
<td>Project Status: Active Workflow Status: Approval Decision Made</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Informed Consent

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
Qualitative Interviews

Title of Project: Experiences of Peer Interaction of Autistic 2SLGBTQ+ Youth in Secondary Institutions

MSW Thesis Student: Brianna Comeau, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University. 
Supervisor: Dr. Maryam Khan, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University. 
Committee Members: Dr. Michael Woodford, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University; Dr. Ciann Wilson, Faculty of Community Psychology.

INFORMATION: The purpose of this study is to examine the intersection of an autistic and 2SLGBTQ+ identity, and how such identities are experienced by youth in secondary institutions (in the context of discrimination and micro-aggression as well as positive and affirming experiences at school). This study also aims to understand the ways in which autistic 2SLGBTQ+-identifying youth (16-22 years old) interactions with peers may have shaped how they view themselves and their identity and determine sources of resiliency and supports which help facilitate positive relationships for 2SLGBTQ+ youth. This study aims to obtain approximately six participants who attend or had attended secondary institution in Canada since grade 10 (this includes Canadian, Indigenous, and undocumented youth). As part of this research, you will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire (which includes a formal autism diagnosis) on Qualtrics, as well as questions in an interview format regarding the above-mentioned topic. You will be audio-recorded for research purposes through Zoom or Microsoft Teams, or if that is inaccessible to you, you may type your answers through the chat feature of Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Additionally, a digital recorder will be recording the audio so that there will be no data loss in the event of a technological dysfunction. Only Brianna Comeau will have access to these recordings and information will be kept confidential. The tapes will not be used for any additional purposes without your additional permission. Also, you will have the option to participate in member reflections, meaning that you will be emailed a document with 2-3 pages of anonymized categories/quotes/themes that emerged through data analysis, and have the option to comment on them through providing a written email response, or attending a group discussion on Zoom with Brianna Comeau and other research participants to discuss your comments. You will be asked to turn your camera off and change your name on Zoom to help ensure privacy. If you cannot attend the Zoom meeting, you will have two weeks to provide an email response to the document.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS: This study asks questions on sensitive topics, including peer victimization/bullying, and asks participants to recall memories which may cause participants to feel distressed. These feelings and emotions are completely normal and should be temporary. If you continue to experience any lasting negative feelings or emotions as a result of participating in the study, there is a list of resources found in this consent form under the ‘Resources’ section. You can decide to not answer any questions, choose to provide as much or as little information as you deem comfortable, and/or stop the interview with no repercussions at
any time. Although you are advised to find a private, distraction-free space for the interview, there is the chance of a loss of privacy if your parents or peers overhear you speaking on Zoom or Teams about your bullying experience and/or sexual/gender identity.

**BENEFITS:** You will help fill a gap in current research knowledge on the unique experiences, needs, and concerns of 2SLGBTQ+ autistic youth in Canada.

**COMPENSATION:** For participating in this study, you will receive a $25 gift card from Amazon. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will still receive this amount.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your name nor any other information that could identify you will not be used in any publication or presentation of the results. Only the thesis student, Brianna Comeau, her thesis supervisor will have access to the data. All data will be stored for 7 years on Laurier OneDrive. Data from this study will be destroyed after 7 years of the start of this project (July 2029). Qualtrics temporarily collects your computer IP address to avoid duplicate responses in the dataset but will not collect information that could identify you personally.

**CONTACT:** If you have questions about the study or the procedures (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in the study), you may contact the thesis student at come7440@mylaurier.ca and the supervisor at mkhan@wlu.ca

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB # 8262), which receives funding from the Research Support Fund. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Jayne Kalmar, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, by telephone at 519-884-1970 ext. 3131 or by email at REBChair@wlu.ca.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You have the right to omit any question(s) you choose. Participants will have all questions about the study answered to their satisfaction before commencing with the interview. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research. Your participation in this research will not violate your future engagements with Wilfrid Laurier University in any way. If you would like to withdraw from the study, you may contact the thesis student by email at come7440@mylaurier.ca and your data will be destroyed.

**FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION:** The results of this research may be published/presented in a thesis, a journal article, and presented at a thesis defence, a conference, and to organizations supporting 2SLGBTQ+ and/or autistic youth in a poster format or as part of a webinar. The thesis will be written by September 2023, and if you would like to receive a copy of it, you may request to receive a copy by emailing come7440@mylaurier.ca

**RESOURCES:**
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255
• **Canada’s Trans Life Line:** 877-330-6366
• **Crisis Services Canada:** 1-833-456-4566 or text 45645 or call 1-866-277-3553 in Quebec
• **Kids Help Phone:** 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868 to chat with a volunteer crisis responder 24/7
• **Black Youth Hotline:** 1-833-294-8650 to chat with a volunteer crisis responder 24/7
• **Hope for Wellness Hotline for Indigenous people:** 1-855-242-3310 to chat with a volunteer crisis responder 24/7
• **Beendigen Inc (Talk4Healing):** call or text 1-855-554-4325 to chat to volunteer crisis responder in 14 Indigenous languages, including Inuktitut
• **YouthLine – 2SLGBTQ+ peer support line:** call 1-800-268-9688 or text 647-694-4275 (Toronto area) available Sun-Friday 4pm-9:30pm ET
• **Naseeha Mental Health Hotline (For Muslims and non-Muslims):** call 1-866-627-3342. Available 7 days a week, 12PM – 12AM EST
• **Nunavut/Kamatsiaqtut Helpline:** 1-800-265-3333 to chat with a volunteer crisis responder 24/7
• **The Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line:** 1-866-925-4419, available 24-hours a day
• **Umbrella Mental Health 2SLGBTQIA Counselling:** [https://www.umhn.ca/](https://www.umhn.ca/)

I agree to take part in this study and understand that the interview will be audio recorded using the built-in recording feature in Zoom/Teams and via an audio recording devise. I acknowledge that my IP address could be checked by the principal researcher through Qualtrics after filling out this consent form to ensure that I am in Canada, and that I will be asked a few demographic screening questions (that includes a formal autism diagnosis) to ensure I am eligible for this research. I agree to have my webcam turned on for the first few minutes of the interview during introductions before the recording starts for identity confirmation. Please do not take part in this study if you are not comfortable with having your interview audio recorded.

□ Yes □ No

I consent to being contacted by the researcher after my interview so that I can provide input on the themes/categories/quotes from the data through email or through a Zoom meeting with other research participants and Brianna Comeau for approximately one hour.

□ Yes □ No

I agree to have my de-identified quotes used in publications, conference workshops and presentations.

□ Yes □ No

It is advised you save or print a copy of this consent document for your records.
Appendix D: Recruitment Poster, Email Template and Facebook Post Template

Email to Organizations/Schools:

Subject: Recruiting Study Participants for a Thesis Project

Dear ____________,

My name is Brianna and I am a Master of Social Work thesis student at Wilfrid Laurier University. My thesis research project examines the intersection of an autistic and 2SLGBTQ+ identity, and how such identities are experienced by youth in secondary institutions (in the context of discrimination and micro-aggression as well as positive and affirming experiences at school). I also aim to understand the ways in which autistic 2SLGBTQ+ -identifying youth (16-22 years old) interactions with peers may have shaped how they view themselves and their identity and determine sources of resiliency and supports which help facilitate positive relationships for 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

I plan to conduct interviews through Zoom or Microsoft Teams, one interview per participant, which should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participants will also be given the option to contribute to member reflections, which is essentially allowing them to view and comment on categories/quotes/themes that I have generated during data analysis. Member reflections can be done either through providing a written email response, or through attending a group meeting on Zoom (with other participants and myself). I am seeking youth aged 16-22 from the autism community who also identify as 2SLGBTQ+ and who have been in the secondary institution in Canada since grade 10. Indigenous, Canadian, and undocumented youth can participate in this research. I am hoping that you could share this opportunity with folks in your organization.

By participating in this research, participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card and can help to fill a gap in current research knowledge on the unique experiences, needs, and concerns of 2SLGBTQ+ autistic youth in Canada. Hopefully, the more that is learned about 2SLGBTQ+ autistic youth, the better they can be supported in school.

This research has been approved by Laurier Research Ethics Board (REB#8262).

If you have any questions, I can be reached by email: come7440@mylaurier.ca

Thank you.

Kind Regards,

Brianna
Hi everyone,
My name is Brianna and I am a Master of Social Work thesis student at Wilfrid Laurier University. My thesis research project examines the intersection of an autistic and 2SLGBTQ+ identity, and how such identities are experienced by youth in secondary institutions (in the context of discrimination and micro-aggression as well as positive and affirming experiences at school). I also aim to understand the ways in which autistic 2SLGBTQ+-identifying youth (16-22 years old) interactions with peers may have shaped how they view themselves and their identity and determine sources of resiliency and supports which help facilitate positive relationships for 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

I plan to conduct interviews through Zoom or Microsoft Teams, one interview per participant, which should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participants will also be given the option to contribute to member reflections, which is essentially allowing them to view and comment on categories/quotes/themes that I have generated during data analysis. Member reflections can be done either through providing a written email response, or through attending a group meeting on Zoom (with other participants and myself).

I am seeking youth aged 16-22 from the autism community who also identify as 2SLGBTQ+, and who have been in the secondary school system in Canada since grade 10. Indigenous, Canadian, and undocumented youth can participate in this research. I am hoping that you could share this opportunity with folks in your organization.

By participating in this research, participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card, and can help to fill a gap in current research knowledge on the unique experiences, needs, and concerns of 2SLGBTQ+ autistic youth in Canada. Hopefully, the more that is learned about 2SLGBTQ+ autistic youth, the better they can be supported in school.

If someone is interested in participating, please tell them to send an email to: come7440@mylaurier.ca
PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

I am looking for study participants who are willing to talk about their experiences with peer relationships and as a 2SLGBTQ+ autistic student, as well as any discriminatory or affirming experiences in the school environment.

If you decide to be part of this study, your participation will consist of one Zoom interview of approximately 45 to 60 minutes of your time. In appreciation of your time, after completing the interview, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card. You will have the option to provide feedback on the data through email or through a Zoom meeting at a later date.

Who is eligible?
Autistic 2SLGBTQ+ youth who are between 16 and 22 years old, and attend or have attended a secondary institution in Canada since grade 10.

Who to contact?
If you are interested in this study, please contact Brianna by email: come7440@mylaurier.ca

This study is being conducted by Laurier Social Work researchers and was approved by the Laurier REB (REB#8262)
Appendix E: Interview Guide

Preamble

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study on Experiences of Peer Interaction Amongst Autistic 2SLGBTQ+ Youth in Secondary Institutions

Before we start the interview, do you have any questions either about the study or the consent process?

If your or my internet stops working at any time during the meeting, there is a call in feature on Zoom/Microsoft Teams, which you may call the number from a landline phone to reach me.

Let’s take a moment and let you review the consent form again before we proceed. *Share screen on Zoom/Microsoft Teams to share this.

As mentioned in the consent form, the study is looking to explore autistic 2SLGBTQ+ youth’s experiences of discriminatory and micro-aggressions as well as positive and affirming experiences at school.

Depending upon your experiences with bullying/peer victimization, difficult feelings may arise during the interview. Please know that you are welcome to skip any questions or to take a break at any time. If a question comes up for you feel unable to talk about, or if someone comes into your space that would not allow you to have privacy, I invite you to say the code word “blue” and I will change the question. If the word “blue” is triggering to you, I invite you to come up with a code word to say to me. Does this make sense?

Please also note that participation in the interview is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty of compensation. Outside of the research team, all information you give me will be kept private and confidential. No individual responses will be reported and any relevant data will be anonymized.

As the interview will be recorded, I ask that you switch off your video once the interview begins, so that only your audio responses will be recorded. Please note that the interview continuing is contingent on the recording. However, if you feel more comfortable sharing your answers through that chat feature, you may do so.

Before we begin, do you have any other questions? If no, then ask the following questions:

1. “Tell me about all the ways you describe yourself. This can be about race, religion, gender, sexuality, disabilities/abilities, autism, or any other characteristics that describe you and are important to you.” Note: make sure to use several follow up questions to capture several identities. Make sure to affirm their identities and thank them for sharing. Note: If a participant identifies themselves as a “queer, autistic person of colour with ADHD”, I can use that later. I
can start off the questions below by saying, “As a queer, autistic person of colour with ADHD, how do you experience school?”

2. “What is school like for you? If you’ve recently graduated, what has high school been like for you?” Follow up, “What are the good parts of school? What are the bad parts? Repeat questions for home, sports/clubs, other places the youth attends.

3. “Tell me about the important people in your life.” Follow up: ask where the participant knows these people from (e.g., school, home, camps, youth centers, sports/clubs, etc.).

4. “How do the important people in your life support you?”

5. “Beyond what we have already talked about, are there people who have made your life difficult?” If so, follow up, “Can you tell me about a few of these incidents?”

6. “Have you been bullied?” [Note: you may already know these things from the questions above, if so, incorporate that knowledge so it flows more like a natural conversation. For example, “You said lunch time was really hard at school and very unpleasant. Does that have anything to do with being bullied?”]. Note: Make sure to acknowledge and empathize with pain.

7. “Does discrimination have anything to do with your bullying?” Discrimination is being treated unjustly because of the category someone belongs to, such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, etc. This can include microaggressions such as misgendering, heterosexual people using derogatory 2SLGBTQ+ slang, being told “you don’t look gay”, etc.

8. Were there any times where you felt you were excluded by your peers? Please tell me about those times.

9. Were there any times where you felt affirmed by your peers? Please tell me about those times.

10. “Are there ways that your identities as a [insert however the participant described themselves, e.g., “straight, white, lesbian person on the autism spectrum”] have been sources of strength for you” If so, ask how. If not, ask “Do you think being [insert identities one at a time, e.g., autistic] can be a good thing?” Repeat for all identities the person holds.

11. Ask about what I might have missed, if there is anything else the youth wants me to know. *Is there anything you would like to discuss that we have not yet discussed?

Wrap-up

Thank you for your time today. You will receive the $25 Amazon gift card within three days. I appreciate all the stories you’ve shared.