

QUEERING BELONGING: HOW LGBTQIA2S+ YOUTH
NAVIGATE BELONGING IN RURAL COLORADO

by
Haley Wintsch

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This scholarly practicum/thesis project of Haley Wintsch, entitled Queering Belonging: How LGBTQIA2S+ Youth Navigate Belonging in Rural Colorado directed and approved by the faculty advisor, has been accepted by the Department of Graduate Studies of Western Colorado University in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Behavioral Science in Rural Community Health.

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Matt Aronson

MBS Director

Dr. Jess Eckhardt

ABSTRACT

This community-based study examined how queer-identified youth in a rural county of Colorado experience interpersonal and community belonging. Despite increased awareness and acceptance of LGBTQIA2S+ populations rural queer youth have worse mental health outcomes than their urban, cisgender, and heterosexual counterparts. This study conducted semi-structures interviews with queer-identifying youth (14 to 18 years old) living in Gunnison County, Colorado (n = 7). Participants were recruited through Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) clubs at public high schools and the local university. Parental consent was waived for minor participants, and participants received a \$15 Visa gift card upon completing an interview. Interviews were captured online and in-person from August 2025 to February 2026 and audio recorded. The General Belongingness Scale (GBS) was administered during interviews to assess overall sense of belonging. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim analyzed in two rounds of coding for narrative and theme, respectively. The findings reveal queer youth belonging impacted by community climate, acceptance in interpersonal relationships, anti-bullying policy enforcement in schools, self-expression, and socioemotional coping skills for resilience. This study was conducted in partnership with Gunnison County Juvenile Services and Gunnison Watershed School District.

Keywords: sense of belonging; adolescent; emerging adult; LGBTQIA2S+; rural

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INTRODUCTION

Queerness lacks an easy-to-follow blueprint, though one can look to myriad pieces of queer literature, art, and media for inspiration, there is no singular way to be queer. Instead, queerness is a messy creation we sculpt from scraps of sensation and desire that are cut up, re-arranged, pasted together, and smashed apart amid a cacophony of criticism which tells us that we're too perverse, too disruptive, and too disobedient. These external narratives, for many, reverberate into internal narratives that relegate one's own voice into a psychic "closet"¹ of sorts. Being queer or acting queer means to fail at conforming to the cisheteronormative² expectations of contemporary American society (Halberstam, 2011). I came out as trans/non-binary eight years ago and I still find my internal "self" pressured by external expectations (e.g., to marry, to feel romantic attraction, to conform to one's sex assigned at birth, etc.). However, this experience of "queer failure" can yield freedom and joy when one steps out of the confines of cisheteronormativity and into authentic self-expression. Maggie Nelson (2016) writes, "Sometimes one has to know something many times over. Sometimes one forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets again" (p. 18). As this report examined the lived experiences of belonging in queer-identified youth living in rural Colorado, their stories remind and the reader not to forget the joyful resistance³ found among queerness, youth, and queer youth.

¹ Closeted or "in the closet" refers to queer people who have not disclosed their LGBTQIA2S+ status. The act of disclosing one's queer identity is often called "coming out".

² Expanding on the work of Cathy J. Cohen (1997) and Meredith Worthen (2016), I define cisheteronormativity as the practices, institutions, and expectations which legitimize, privilege, and normalize cisgender and heterosexual identities and behaviors.

³ Here I reference Dr. Kristie Soares's (2023) book *Playful Protests: The Political Work of Joy in Latinx Media* in which they define joy as, "a politicized form of pleasure, one that not only produces gratification but also unsettles social norms of gender, sexuality, race, and class" (p. 2).

Sense of belonging can be understood as “the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences” (Allen et al., 2021, p. 87). Henceforth “belonging” and “sense of belonging” are used interchangeably to describe this subjective, internal feeling of connection. The desire to belong is a universal fundamental human need (Maslow, 1943; Kunc, 1992) whereby a lack of belonging is associated with increased incidence of psychopathology, stress, immune dysfunction, suicide and suicidal ideation, cardiovascular disease, and early mortality (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cruwys et al., 2025). An individual’s capacity for belonging is influenced by an interconnected network of individual, interpersonal, systemic, and temporal factors (Allen et al., 2021; Bronfenbrenner, 1981). For instance, an individual’s socioemotional coping skills, developmental history, quality of available interpersonal relationships, group membership, cultural norms, place of residence, and generational cohort all influence their feeling of and capacity for belonging.

Greater visibility and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community⁴ have led queer youth to come out earlier than past generations, often during adolescence rather than early adulthood, which means they are coming out and navigating stigma at a developmentally sensitive time (Garcia et al., 2020; Russell & Fish, 2016). Research consistently shows that coming out increases risk for “verbal and physical harassment” (Russell & Fish, 2016, p. 475) yet is protective for mental health as it increases confidence and allows an individual to integrate parts of their identity into a cohesive sense of self (Solomon et al., 2015). Normative adolescent development is characterized by “experiences of instability” (Torkelson, 2012, p. 134) and

⁴ The gay and lesbian rights movement increased education on the LGBTQIA2S+ population and increased rights for queer folx (e.g., removal of homosexuality as a mental health disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, decriminalization of sodomy, advancements in HIV/AIDS treatment, etc.). However, the community still faces daily threats, especially for queer people with Black, brown, Indigenous, transgender, and dis(abled) bodies (Burnes and Stanley, 2017; Ritchie, 2011).

“heightened self- and peer regulation regarding (especially) gender and sexuality norms” (Russell & Fish, 2016, p. 475). Thus, adolescents and emerging adults are particularly vulnerable to the negative outcomes of poor belonging as they explore and disclose their gender and sexuality identities during an unstable life stage (Garcia et al., 2020; Gonzales et al., 2022). This is demonstrated in research that finds queer-identified youth experience forms of discrimination, harassment, and structural barriers that are not experienced by their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. These experiences create what psychologist Ilan Meyer (2003) termed minority stress, a chronic elevated stress response in the queer body caused by living in a stigmatized social position, which is linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, cardiovascular disease, immune dysfunction, and early mortality.

In recent decades, the rural United States has reached historical levels of cultural and informational exchange with metropolitan areas due to advancements in technology and communication (Fu et al., 2024). However, rural populations continue to experience worse health outcomes due to limited access to healthcare, lower socioeconomic status, and rising incidence of diseases of despair (i.e., alcoholism, depression, suicidality; Ferdinand et al., 2023). Researchers consistently find that rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth have poorer mental health compared to their urban queer peers which is often attributed to geographic isolation, religious conservatism, and lack of access to resources (Kemmerer et al., 2025). Studies by Paceley and colleagues (2017; 2019; 2020) offer a nuanced explanation of this rural-urban health disparity, finding that community climate to be a stronger mediating factor than community size in queer health outcomes. In other words, they argue that the absence of queer-affirming policies, queer-accepting spaces, and queer-identifying people in a community is more harmful to LGBTQIA2S+ youth than population size or geographic isolation alone. Moreover, extant

research largely overlooks the experiences of gender and sexual minorities and non-metropolitan communities with very few studies on queer-identified youth *who live in* rural settings.

This study attempts to fill this gap and takes place in a rural and frontier county on Colorado's western slope, Gunnison County (henceforth referred to as Gunnison County, Gunnison Valley, or "the Valley"). The two largest townships in the county, Gunnison and Crested Butte, are mountain towns which house Western Colorado University and Crested Butte Mountain Resort, respectively. The State of the Community 2022 Report (Powell et al., 2022) identified LGBTQ+ youth as a population of concern for poor mental health outcomes, particularly suicidality. Additionally, the 2023 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS) which provides essential data on student behavioral health was forced to suppress data on queer-identifying students due to low response rates (CDPHE, 2026). This study emerged from conversations with Alex Stephan, the Socioemotional Learning Coordinator for Gunnison County Juvenile Services, who highlighted the need for a highly local study which seeks to better understand the behavioral health needs of queer youth in the Valley.

Purpose of the Study

This report presents findings from a community-based study which examines experiences of interpersonal and community belonging among queer-identified youth ages 14 to 18 years (n=7) living in rural Gunnison County, Colorado. The purpose of this study was to generate a foundational understanding of queer youth in the Valley, address gaps in local data on queer youth, and inform efforts of local stakeholders in supporting LGBTQIA2S+ youth behavioral health. Accordingly, the research design was inductive and community-based, meaning findings were generated from emerging patterns in the data rather than through hypothesis testing, and community partners were key collaborators throughout the study. This study worked closely with Gunnison County Substance Abuse Prevention Project (GCSAPP), Gunnison Watershed School District (GWSD), and Western Queer Collective in the design, recruitment, data collection and analysis, and dissemination of findings. This study explored the following questions:

- (1) How do queer youth in Gunnison County experience belonging?
- (2) What factors promote and constrain their sense of belonging?
- (3) How might queer youth belonging be impacted by rurality, online spaces, and queer-affinity spaces?

Participants were recruited with respondent-driven sampling (RDS) with local queer affinity spaces (i.e., GSAs⁵) and word-of-mouth were primary sites and strategies for recruitment which is a recommended for difficult-to-reach populations (Heckathorn, 1997; Jones, 2016).

Minor participants were given the option of providing parental informed consent or minor assent to ensure the inclusion and safety of participants who are not out to their families (Smith and

⁵ Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender-Sexuality Alliances (i.e., GSAs), are school clubs intended to provide an accepting space for LGBTQIA2S+ students and their allies. For this study, we worked with Safe Space at Gunnison High School, Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) at Crested Butte Secondary School, and Western Queer Collective at Western Colorado University.

Schwartz, 2019). Data were collected through one-time interviews which were audio recorded and included semi-structured verbal dialogue and an online survey which collected responses to demographics, pseudonym preferences, and the General Belongingness Scale (GBS; Malone et al., 2012), which assessed general sense of belonging. Interviews were conducted both in-person at public locations (e.g., coffee shops, libraries) and virtually via video call to promote participant safety, agency, and comfort (Nye et al., 2025). Data were analyzed with thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) which assesses the content and themes of stories with young people as active agents in telling their stories. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Western Colorado University (#HRC-2025-02-06-R34).

Statement of Reflexivity

Qualitative research challenges traditional positivist epistemologies which prioritize establishing statistical significance, generalizability, and causality (van de Sande & Byvelds, 2015). Instead, qualitative research is “interested not in prediction and control but in understanding” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4) and narrative inquiry, a form of qualitative research, views story “as the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (ibid, p. 4). In narrative and qualitative research, critical reflexive practices that examine the inevitable biases and presuppositions of the researcher are essential tools to ensure validity (Newman et al., 2022; Nye et al., 2025; Reed, 2023). The principal investigator holds disproportionate power as the decision-maker in a study’s design, analysis, and dissemination; as such, they have the potential to distort findings, exclude perspectives, and cause harm (Bishop, 1998; Riessman, 2008).

This study incorporated critical reflexive practices into all stages of this study from design to data analysis to generating this report (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), and this positionality statement serves as a disclosure of how my own identities might inform my analysis. My role in this study is as a graduate student and principal investigator, and the identities I hold include being white, middle class, college educated, U.S. citizen, non-local to Gunnison Valley, trans/agender/non-binary, lesbian, queer, relationship anarchist (polyamorous), ideologically Left, able-bodied, and atheist. My membership with the LGBTQIA2S+ community enabled me to code switch to a queer vernacular and lexicon with participants which might have helped me gain their trust. However, I was careful to consider how differences such as age and rurality create vastly different experiences of queerness for participants.

Throughout the research, I engaged with writing memos and field notes as an essential practice to sustain a critical dialogue with myself to examine biases, subjectivity, and observations. I relied on meetings with my advisor, colleagues, and community partners to further examine and critique these observations and beliefs. During data analysis I regularly revisited the audio recordings and transcripts to check for accuracy.

Positionality statements and reflexive practice are methods to reduce subjectivity, but they do not address the disparities among who has access to conduct research within the Western academy (van de Sande & Byvelds, 2015). This statement aims for transparency to allow you, as the reader, to better understand the context of this report.

Queer Terminology

This report uses the terms ‘LGBTQIA2S+’ and ‘queer’ to describe identities, behaviors, symbols, and performances which fail to conform to the standards of cisheteronormativity (Cohen, 1997; Worthen, 2016). The initialism LGTBQIA2S+ stands for the sexual and gender minority (SGM) identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual and/or ally, Two-Spirit, and the plus symbol aims to include any unnamed identities (Levounis et al., 2020). The term LGBTQIA2S+, along with its variations (e.g., LGB, GLBT, LGBTQ+), have been widely adopted in the United States since the 1990s, proceeding the gay and lesbian movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Jagose, 1996). Humans have demonstrated a diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities, sex characteristics across time (Foucault, 1978) and the language used to describe these acts is equally fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing.⁶

In the United States pre-WWII, ‘queer’ was the predominant term used both descriptively by homosexual men and women and pejoratively by straight and cis- people to marginalize and discriminate against homosexual men and women (Jagose, 1996). During the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, widespread homophobia prevented adequate public health responses, caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of LGBTQIA2S+ people, and coincided with increased usage of ‘queer’ as a slur (ibid). However, activists and groups in the 1980s and 1990s, such as QUEER NATION, refused ‘queer’ as a sentence of death or criminality and reclaimed ‘queer’ as an act of resistance (Jones, 2023). Alexander Doty (1993) describes queerness as a “flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (pp. 2-3). Queer has been adopted more widely in recent decades but

⁶ The LGBTQIA2S+ lexicon in the United States has influenced speech patterns across the globe due to the dominance of American media (Jagose, 1996). However, readers should note that these terms are not always appropriate across geography, language, culture, and age cohort.

remains contested among queer scholars who critique its association with white queerness, queer elders who associate it with its pejorative usage, and the growing anti-gender movement which deem 'queer' a threat to conservative understandings of gender (Butler, 2025; Jones, 2023). This report adopts 'queer' to reflect the language of young people who use it as an all-encompassing term for the LGBTQIA2S+ community, as its own identity label (i.e., queer, genderqueer), and as a transformative politics (Cohen, 1997; Jagose, 1996).

Paper Structure

The next section will synthesize extant discourse and research on belonging and rural queer youth health disparities. Then, the “Methods” section will explain this study’s guiding methodologies, recruitment and sampling techniques, instrumentation, data collection methods, and, finally, the steps taken to analyze and theme data. The “Results” section will present the findings in five themes which include: (1) definitions of belonging, (2) spaces that promote and constrain belonging, (3) narratives about local community, (4) life stage differences in belonging, and (5) narratives for coping and resilience. Lastly, the findings will be discussed in conversation with current scholarship, limitations of the study will be highlighted, and recommendations for future research and programming will conclude the final “Discussion and Conclusion” section of the report. See Appendix A for a list of figures, Appendix B for a list of acronyms, Appendix C and D for the General Belongingness Scale and demographics survey questions, respectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the COVID-19 shutdowns of 2020, there has been a rise in social disconnection and isolation in what the U.S. Surgeon General (2023) calls “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” Social geographers have connected rising “conservatism, nationalism and nativism” (Halse, 2018, p. 1) to changes in the social environment. Geographer Ash Amin (2012) critiques policies of assimilation and nationalism for creating a “society of strangers.” These changes have generated increased attention on sense of belonging across the fields of political science, gender studies, cultural studies, social geography, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and adolescent health (Halse, 2018). Widely accepted as a core human need (Maslow, 1943), O’Neill (1996) writes in her ethnographic study with Native Americans on the Flathead Reservation in Montana, “[b]elonging is crucial for the self” (p. 179). Without a sense of belonging, an individual is at risk for cardiovascular disease, physical illness, depression, immune system dysfunction, psychopathology, and premature death (Allen et al., 2021).

Belonging, as a psychological concept, can be understood as “an internal affective or evaluative feeling, or perception” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 174) of being an integral, accepted member of a relationship, system, or environment (Hagerty et al., 1992; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is relational, meaning belonging must be understood as it related to a referent such a social group, relationship, place, or object (Haggerty et al., 1992). Any one person may hold membership to several social groups “formed on the basis of shared values, attitudes, and cultures, of emotional attachments to specific places, spaces, people, animals and material things, or by participating in specific flows of ideas, cultures and social practices” (Halse, 2018, p. 5). Experiences of belonging, Halse argues, “assert hegemonic and counter-hegemonic symbolic and social

practices including languages, values, and cultural practices” (p. 4). Social group membership connects “individuals into social alignments based on shared commonalities, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship and national affiliation” (ibid, p. 4). In other words, sites of belonging maintain (or disrupt) cultural expectations and norms.

Belonging is often conflated with related constructs, yet it is conceptually distinct from other social and psychological experiences. Functional aspects of relationships describe observable elements of social ties rather than how those relationships are subjectively experienced (i.e., belonging). This includes concepts such as social support (receiving help and companionship; Langford et al., 1997), inclusion (access to participate in a social collective; Jansen et al., 2014), isolation (social, sensory, or spatial deprivation; Gilmartin et al., 2013), and sense of community (shared group membership and resource exchange; Frost and Meyer, 2012). Related subjective experiences often coincide with but are not synonymous with belonging. For instance, acceptance (being welcomed), inclusion (granted access), and relatedness (perceived care, trust, and connection) may be present in the absence of belonging (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Commonly coinciding with diminished belonging are loneliness (negative feeling of lacking connection; Hagerty et al., 1992) and alienation (physical presence with emotional or existential disconnection; Overend, 1975). These examples demonstrate belonging as distinct from and related to other social and affective experiences.

Sense of belonging, informed by one’s social and geographic environment, is negotiated differently depending on an individual’s identities, experiences, and temperament (Allen et al., 2021). Thus, for queer-identified youth in rural Gunnison County, belonging is influenced by their rural environment, queer identities, life stage, and social ecology. This literature review will orient the reader to dominant theories on belonging, connect these understandings of belonging

to extant research on the health and well-being of queer-identified youth, and situate queer youth belonging within rural contexts, specifically that of Gunnison County, Colorado.

Theories and Frameworks for Belonging

Sense of belonging, due to its ubiquitous nature, is often mistaken for other social experiences (such as sense of community or exclusion) making it difficult to operationalize. Halse (2018) points to this issue in conversations about belonging, saying that belonging is “naturalised, unspoken, and unrecognised” (p. 7). In other words, people are not always talking about belonging when they use the term ‘belonging’. Belonging has been theorized across the social sciences of psychology (e.g., Allen, Baumeister, Leary, Maslow), sociology (e.g., Yuval-Davis), and geography (e.g., Antonsich, Chavis, McMillan). Theories of belonging were influenced by early psychological research on social group dynamics and sense of community.⁷ For instance, Lewin (1948) found that membership to a social group shapes individual perceptions, feelings, and behavior and offers a sense of safety necessary for psychological stability. McMillan and Chavis (1986) extended earlier research by defining sense of community through membership (i.e., sense of belonging), influence (i.e., sense of mattering), integration and needs fulfillment, and emotional connection which positioned sense of belonging as central to community.

In a seminal study, Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) belongingness hypothesis theorized belonging as an evolutionary-grounded motivation to form and maintain meaningful social connections which influence cognition, emotion, and behavior. They argued that individuals often resist losing social bonds even when doing so is maladaptive, which reinforces the pervasiveness of the need to belong. Baumeister and Leary emphasize the role of frequent, stable interactions characterized by care and concern in creating a sense of belonging. Allen and

⁷ This review synthesizes major scholarship on belonging within psychology and sociology as they are situated within in the Western academy, where decisions about what knowledge is produced, published, and legitimized are influenced by enduring colonial and economic power structures.

colleagues' (2021) integrative framework for belonging expands on the belongingness hypothesis by identifying four components for belonging which include competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. *Competencies* refer to socioemotional “skills and abilities” that support an individual’s capacity to belong. *Opportunities* encompass the “groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur” (ibid, p. 92). *Motivations* for belonging, to Allen and colleagues, differ between individuals depending on past experiences and personality traits. Finally, *perceptions* are the “subjective feelings and cognitions” (ibid, p. 94) that emerge from lived experience and reflect how belonging is interpreted. These components work synergistically with sociocultural, environmental, and temporal contexts to create one’s experience of belonging.

Belonging has consistently emerged across studies as a measurable construct shaped by motivations, relationships, and developmental processes. Hagerty and colleagues (1992) argue that an individual’s energy, perceptions, motivations, and potential for meaningful connection influences their capacity for belonging. Moreover, they identify valued involvement (i.e., feeling “valued, needed, [and] accepted”; ibid, p. 174) and fit (i.e., social compatibility) as core components of belonging. A later study by Lee and Robbins (1995) argues that early life experiences of “[c]hronic or traumatic empathetic failures” (p. 233) is associated with isolation behaviors and lack of belonging later in life. They assert that belonging is indicated by interpersonal experiences of companionship, affiliation (i.e., shared values, beliefs, identities), and connectedness. Together, these perspectives frame belonging as a multidimensional construct influenced by interpersonal experiences and developmental histories.

Social geographers and political scientists have expanded concepts of belonging beyond interpersonal relationships to include attachment to place, feelings of home, and political identity

(Antonsich, 2010; Youkhana, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). Political geographer Marco Antonsich's (2010) concept of place-belongingness defines belonging as an "emotional and spatial connectedness to places and spaces" (p. 32), shaped by interwoven autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal dimensions. Similarly, Nira Yuval-Davis's politics of belonging situates belonging within power structures that include or exclude individuals based on their social locations (e.g., nationality, profession, kinship). For Yuval-Davis (2011), belonging is inseparable from a "perpetual state of becoming" (p. 16) in which identities are continuously "construct[ed], authoriz[ed] and contest[ed]" (p. 16). This understanding aligns with Halse's (2018) notion of "identity auto-narratives" which describe a person's understanding of their own identity as "partial, incomplete, performance[s] based on past and present experiences, conditions and the socio-cultural context" (p. 9).

It is at the intersection of belonging and identity that ethical and political considerations become unavoidable (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011). The politics of belonging are concerned with "the boundaries of the political community of belonging, the boundaries which, sometimes physically, but always symbolically, separate the world population into 'us' and 'them'" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 20). Central to Yuval-Davis's work is a "feminist political project of belonging" (2011, p. 45) that foregrounds intersectionality as essential for examining how identities, power, and belonging are mutually constituted. While these frameworks may appear abstract, they directly attend to the material consequences of inclusion and exclusion, demonstrating how belonging is structured through unequal power relations. In extreme circumstances, these dynamics consolidate in what Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011) terms "regimes of belonging" which can legitimize exclusionary practices and threaten democratic participation and rights.

Health Disparities for LGBTQIA2S+ Youth

Adolescence and emerging (or “young”) adulthood refer to the developmental transition from childhood to adulthood which occurs during the ages of approximately 11 to 17 years old and 18 to 25 years old, respectively. Emerging adulthood is a relatively new developmental construct that arose in response to cultural and economic shifts that have prolonged the transition toward financial, social, and familial independence, particularly in the United States (Arnett, 2000; Torkelson, 2012). During this period, it is developmentally normative for individuals to explore sexual orientation and gender identity, begin engaging in romantic and sexual relationships, develop individual belief and value systems, and differentiate themselves from their family (Erikson, 1968; Remschmidt, 1994; Russell & Fish, 2016). Notably, the average age of coming out as LGBTQIA2S+ has dropped from approximately 20 years old in the 1970s to around 14 years old by 2010 (D’Aguelli et al., 2010; Russell & Fish, 2016; Troiden, 1989). As a result, many queer adolescents come out during middle and high school amid a period of “heightened self- and peer-regulation regarding gender and sexuality norms, heightened prejudicial attitudes, and internalized homonegativity” (Dürbaum & Sattler, 2020, p. 299). As Russell and Fish (2016) observe, contemporary queer youth disclose their identities in contexts of “strong peer influence” which makes them particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and harassment.

LGBTQIA2S+ youth experience poorer mental and physical health disparities compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers – a pattern established in the early disparity-focused studies from the 1980s onward and reaffirmed by current findings (Bostwick et al., 2014). National surveys indicate alarmingly high rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among LGBTQIA2S+ youth. For instance, in 2024, the Trevor Project reported

that 39% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year. These inequities are commonly explained through the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) which is the predominant framework guiding LGBTQIA2S+ health research (BlackDeer, 2025). Minority stress posits that chronic, socially produced stressors – including victimization, discrimination, anticipated rejection, and internalized stigma – accumulate over time to undermine health and well-being. The model distinguishes between external experiences such as harassment and exclusion (i.e., distal stressors) and internal processes like identity concealment and internalized stigma (i.e., proximal stressors), both of which have been empirically associated with increased depressive symptoms, suicidality, and disordered eating among LGBTQIA2S+ youth (Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2020; Gorse, 2022; Parker & Harriger, 2020). These risks are markedly elevated among youth of color, bisexual/pansexual, transgender, and questioning youth who face additional forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, bi/panphobia, transphobia) and threats to embodiment such as gender dysphoria (Gorse, 2022; Trevor Project, 2024).

Despite known health disparities within the LGBTQIA2S+ community, research has historically privileged mainstream, binary, and Western identity categories (Suárez et al., 2021; Walker, 2021) and failed to capture fluid, Indigenous, and non-binary identities. Examples include “Two-Spirit, Indigiqueer, nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, asexual, pansexual, graysexual identities” (BlackDeer, 2025, p. 4). Moreover, McBride (2021) delineates between gender and sexuality identities, maintaining that “gender identity development is independent from sexual orientation” (p. 105). LGBTQIA2S+ experiences must be understood as “intersecting with other salient personal, ethnic, cultural, and social identities” (Russell & Fish, 2016, p. 466). Colonial rule criminalized and pathologized non-normative genders and sexualities, producing intergenerational and community traumas that continue to shape family

relationships, migration from homelands, and health outcomes (O’Sullivan, 2021). An intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) acknowledges that individuals who hold multiple minority identities navigate a layered experience of “discrimination based on the combination of their race, sexual orientation, or gender, as well as their social class, skin tone, or gender expression” (BlackDeer, 2025, p. 3). Intersectionality remains an underutilized framework in LGBTQIA2S+ research (Kemmerer et al., 2025) as evidenced by the persistent overrepresentation of white youth in study samples with 70-90% of participants in extant literature identifying as white, according to Reed (2023). This trend “not only obscures the realities of youth of color but also misrepresents the diversity of rural communities” (Kemmerer et al., 2025, p. 13). In response, a growing body of scholars call for community-based, culturally grounded, and intersectional research approaches as an ethical imperative for LGBTQIA2S+ scholarship (BlackDeer, 2025; Walker, 2021).

The ubiquitous depiction of queerness as one of discrimination, violence, and disparity is a narrative of deficit which overlooks the adaptive strategies through which queer cope, resist, and thrive despite their circumstances (Russel & Fish, 2016). As Kemmerer and colleagues (2025) write in their review of literature on rural LGBTQIA+ youth, “[a]cross studies, youth show the capacity to build supportive networks, foster affirming identities, and navigate hostile environments” (p. 12). In response, scholars have adopted strengths-based approaches which foreground protective factors and inform efforts to support queer youth (Gates & Kelly, 2017). For instance, pathways toward self-acceptance and psychological well-being include identity disclosure (Bridge et al., 2022; Charbonnier et al., 2018), supportive peer and familial relationships (Russel & Fish 2016; Sheets & Mohr, 2009; Shilo & Savaya 2011), access to queer-affirming affinity spaces (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2022), and anti-bullying policies

(McBride, 2021). This underscores the need for research, policy, and practice which prioritizes “protective, affirming, and culturally responsive” (Kemmerer et al., 2025, p. 12) approaches toward supportive LGBTQIA2S+ well-being.

Research consistently demonstrates that belonging for queer youth is deeply relational and embedded within multiple overlapping social contexts with family relationships playing a particularly central role (Gorse, 2022; Kemmerer et al., 2025). Familial acceptance of queer identities and open conversations about gender and sexuality are among the strongest protective factors for mental health, with studies showing that approximately 40% of queer youth identify family as their primary source of support and affirming home environments (Shah et al., 2024). Conversely, family rejection of a youth’s LGBTQIA2S+ identity is associated with elevated depression, anxiety, suicidality, homelessness, substance use, and sexual risk-taking behaviors (D’Aguelli, 2010; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2022; Russell & Fish, 2016). Coming out improves well-being when met with acceptance but exacerbates health risks when met with rejection (Doyle, 2018; Hall, 2018). Beyond parents and caregivers, recent research identifies siblings as under-recognized allies with perceived sibling support acting as a buffer against internalizing symptoms among transgender and non-binary youth (Shah et al., 2024).

Schools, peers, and community environmental substantially shape queer youths’ experiences of belonging. Since adolescents spend much of their time at in learning environments, school climate powerfully mediates belonging and mental health outcomes (Shah et al., 2024). Schools with affirming GSAs, inclusive curricula, protective policies, and trusted adults promote safety, self-esteem, and well-being, whereas hostile environments marked by misgendering, exclusion, and erasure predict depression, anxiety, and suicidality, especially for transgender and GNC youth (Gorse, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2009; Russell & Fish, 2016). When

families or schools are unsafe, queer youth frequently cultivate peer support and “chosen family” as an adaptive and resilient response (Morgan, 2025). Peer connectedness, particularly with LGBTQIA2S+ peers and allies, strengthens self-acceptance and protects against minority stress, the physiological stress response to chronic experiences of discrimination, stigma, and victimization (Bridge et al., 2022). Digital spaces further extend opportunities for belonging, enabling identity exploration, peer support, and LGBTQIA2S+ education (Kemmerer et al., 2025). In online spaces, queer youth can “control the expression of their sexual or gender identities to prevent or reduce exposure to stigma and discrimination” (Berger et al., 2022, p. 14). The expansive possibilities of online spaces are especially influential for individuals experiencing isolation and hostility in-person, though emerging research also underscores the need to mitigate online risks (Berger et al., 2022; Kemmerer et al., 2025).

At the structural level, inclusive state and school policies are associated with reduced victimization and harassment which underscores that belonging is not solely interpersonal but also politically and institutionally produced (Kosciw et al., 2009; Russel & Fish, 2016). Unfortunately, the current political climate and so-called “gender ideology movement,” which deem queer youth a threat to the traditional family (Butler, 2024), have created drastic disinvestment in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and programs, negatively impacting LGBTQIA2S+ students and faculty (Goldberg, 2024). As Russel and Fish (2016) elaborate, the “lack of support in the fabric of many institutions that guide the lives of LGBT youth (e.g., their schools, families, faith communities) limits their rights and protections and leaves them more vulnerable to experiences that may compromise their mental health” (p. 472). The extant literature present queer youth as resilient individuals who navigate and live within

institutions, policies, and relationships which fail to understand their experiences and protect their rights.

Rural Gunnison County Context

Rurality is defined inconsistently across the literature and can refer to an area's population size, proximity to metropolitan centers, degree of geographic isolation, and cultural identification (Elliott et al., 2022). This study adopts the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Continuum (RUC) codes, which classify counties based on population size and distance from metropolitan areas to identify Gunnison County as rural (USDA ERS, 2023). Stereotypes that depict queer youth as either nonexistent or inherently at risk in rural contexts further marginalize rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth from mainstream discourses and resources. Dominant narratives do not imagine rural areas as queer areas, or as Kemmerer and colleagues (2025) write, "urban-centric framing casts the city as the ideal destination for queerness, falsely positioning rurality and queerness as incompatible" (p. 2). They go on to describe how these stereotypes arise, arguing that "[r]ight-wing political elites have strategically tapped into the socioeconomic resentment of rural communities...to advance their agendas" (ibid, p. 2). This "myth" reflects the assumption that all rural communities are uniformly shaped by conservative, religiously fundamental belief systems which limit community acceptance of LGBTQIA2S+ populations (Boso, 2019; Rickard and Yancey, 2018).

Why do some rural communities create hostile environments for queer youth while others offer the benefit of small-town connectedness Paceley and colleagues (2020) found community climate to be a "more robust indicator" of sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth physical and mental health than community size. In other words, the presence of "supportive policies, open-and affirming churches, other SGM people...and visibility of SGM identities" (ibid, p. 431) is more significant for health outcomes than population size alone. Young people are profoundly influenced by their political and geographic environments, and rural contexts can

present both distinct barriers and protections for queer youth well-being. In their 2025 review of research on rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth, Kemmerer and colleagues found consistent evidence of disparities in mental health and well-being, with multiple studies documenting higher rates of depression, suicidality and suicide attempts, substance use, and non-suicidal self-injury (Goldbach et al., 2023; Kemmerer et al., 2025). Structural barriers commonly include geographic distance from affirming services (e.g., gender-affirming care), which for youth in the Gunnison Valley requires travel of more than an hour, along with transportation constraints, and heightened visibility within smaller communities (Kemmerer et al., 2025). These disparities were often attributed to a lack of adequate support systems and presence of bullying, victimization, and discrimination, which create a hostile community climate (Kemmerer et al., 2025; Paceley et al., 2017). For instance, Rickard and Yancey (2018) found that higher levels of victimization in rural settings reduced queer youths' comfort when disclosing their identity. Moreover, Kemmerer and colleagues (2025) identified 19 studies which found perceived community hostility to consistently undermine visibility, social support, feelings of safety, and social connectedness among rural queer youth (Kemmerer et al., 2025). At the same time, rural queer youth may benefit from supportive local networks, visible queer life, access to queer-informed resources and education, and inclusive policies and legislation, all of which can expand belonging and improve health outcomes when present (Kemmerer et al., 2021).

With a population of 17,310 in 2024, Gunnison County, Colorado is designated as a rural, nonmetropolitan county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; USDA ERS, 2023). The county is predominantly white (92.8%), primarily non-Hispanic or Latino (85.4%), and largely Christian, with Baptist denominations comprising an estimated 25-49% of religious affiliation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; U.S. Religion Census, 2020). Within the county, communities differ substantially.

Gunnison is a more socioeconomically diverse university town with the Western Colorado University campus, whereas Crested Butte is characterized as a wealthier, more demographically homogenous ski resort community (Powell et al., 2025). These contrasts in racial diversity are reflected in public school demographics. During the 2024-2025 academic year, 9th to 12th grade student enrollment was approximately 410 students at Gunnison High School (59.8% white; 36.1% Hispanic/Latino) compared to 234 students at Crested Butte Secondary School (90.8% white; 6.3% Hispanic/Latino), which reflects limited racial diversity at Crested Butte (NCES, 2024).

Although Gunnison is often imagined, both by outsiders and newcomers, as a mountain idyll, recent behavioral health and community assessments describe a more complex landscape shaped by economic precarity, housing instability, and mounting psychosocial stressors (Powell et al., 2022; 2025). Between 2019 and 2022, real household incomes declined by 16% while housing costs increased by 23%, leaving many families unable to meet basic needs and disproportionately affecting young people (Powell et al., 2022). The county's suicide rate remains among the highest in the state (Powell et al., 2022). More than one-third of students qualify for free or reduced meals, and food assistance requests quadrupled from 2016 to 2024 (Powell et al., 2025). These pressures are reflected in worsening youth mental health indicators. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, students report heightened stress, isolation, housing insecurity, substance use, and limited access to youth-specific supports (Powell et al., 2022). Queer youth are explicitly identified as a population of concern, with 13.2% of LGB high school students in 2022 reporting a suicide attempt in the last year (Powell et al., 2022). Community reports describe this tension as the "paradise paradox," wherein the scenic landscape and outdoor recreation culture coexist with exclusionary dynamics, limited services, and a strong ethos of

self-reliance that may discourage help-seeking and leave marginalized youth without accessible pathways to care (Powell et al., 2022; 2025).

METHODS

Methodologies

The primary aim of this study was to examine how queer-identified youth narrate experiences of belonging and make meaning of those experiences within their social and geographic contexts. The study design was informed by intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), Lee and Robbins' (1995) relational framework for belonging, strengths-based approach (Gates & Kelly, 2017), and community-based participatory action research (Collins et al., 2018; Lewin, 1939). Guided by these frameworks, the study employed narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008) to capture and analyze participants' lived experiences of belonging.

An intersectional approach was central to the study's design and analysis by considering how queer youth experience stress and belonging differently depending on the interaction of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, place, and other social positions (Crenshaw, 1991). Scholars widely recommend adopting an intersectional lens for research with queer identifying youth to better understand the nuance of different minority experiences (BlackDeer, 2025). The minority stress model was applied in conjunction with intersectionality to understand how experiences of stigma, discrimination, and victimization might create stress responses in the participant and subsequently impact belonging (Meyer, 2003).

Belonging was analytically examined using Lee and Robbins (1995) which identify three indicators of belonging – companionship (secure and supportive relationships), affiliation (shared values, identities, and social alignment), and connectedness (feelings of comfort and closeness in social environments). This framework for belonging was well-suited to this study's focus on interpersonal and community belonging as the indicators are naturally discussed in interview

contexts. A study titled “‘I’m Going to Live My Life Freely’: Authenticity as an Indicator of Belonging Among Urban Latinx LGBTQ+ Youth” by Gonzalez, Reese, and Connaughton-Espino (2022) used Lee and Robbin’ (1995) definition of belonging and expanded the definition to include authenticity. They explain “embracing authenticity emerged as a subtheme of thriving through adversity” (p. 88).

A strengths-based approach as proposed by Gates and Kelly (2017) and supported by Madireddy and Madireddy (2022) recognizes that while adversity may be part of the queer experience, queer individuals “have a wealth of ideas, competencies, and resources that they can draw upon” (Gates & Kelley, 2017, p. 236). This approach focuses more on a queer individual’s resilience and strengths to affirm their LGBTQIA2S+ identity and experience. This approach is a rejection of historical models which condemned, pathologized, and criminalized queerness and sought to eradicate or correct it (Gates & Kelley, 2017). The framework comes from social work practices and can be applied to research, clinical practice, and community-based supportive services which makes it a possible application for readers of this report in their work.

Community-based action research principles seek to de-center researcher authority and position the local community as “storehouses” of critical knowledge (Johnson, 2017). This approach aligned with the ethical and practical goal to center queer youth voices and generate findings applicable to local support efforts. Moreover, this approach resists colonial practices of knowledge appropriation by focusing on community members. Key stakeholders served as collaborators and contextual informants throughout the research process, particularly Alex Stephan (Socioemotional Learning Coordinator with Gunnison County Juvenile Services). This methodological approach builds on prior scholarship employing intersectional, narrative, and belonging-focused analysis to study queer youth experiences (e.g., Bates et al., 2020;

23Gonzales et al., 2022; and Marlin et al., 2023). We had originally planned a community-based community forum to solicit feedback from participants but given the current political climate and risks to transgender/GNC youth we decided it was safer to reach out to participants individually for feedback. This was done by sharing a one-page participant narrative with each participant.

The type of analysis, thematic narrative inquiry, uses words and stories as data from which themes are generated (Riessman, 2008). This privileged participant's stories as tools for meaning making rather than relying on observational measures of belonging. This aligned with this study's objective to center youth as active agents in constructing lived experiences into internal memories and feelings which are communicated via words and story.

Recruitment and Sampling

Participants were recruited using snowball and respondent-driven sampling methods, which are commonly employed for hard-to-access populations, including rural communities and LGBTQIA2S+ youth (Hughes et al., 2021; Schrager et al., 2019). Primary recruitment sites included the queer-affirming clubs and at Gunnison High School, Crested Butte Secondary School, and Western Colorado University. The research team collaborated with teachers, counselors, and student facilitators associated with these groups to distribute recruitment materials and flyers to GSAs (Newman et al., 2022). All participants were recruited through GSAs. Additional recruitment efforts included posting flyers in public spaces (e.g., coffeeshops, community boards) and sharing study announcements on the Gunnison Valley Pride Instagram account. Participants were also invited to share the study flyer with peers, consistent with respondent-driven sampling procedures (Hughes et al., 2021).

Eligibility criteria required participants, at the time of the interview, to be between 14 and 18 years old, reside in Gunnison County, and self-identify as LGBTQIA2S+. During recruitment, several inquiries were excluded after being identified as likely spam or phishing responses. Following an initial social media post, an influx of inquiries came from individuals who claimed eligibility but demonstrated limited knowledge of Gunnison County and declined to answer basic screening questions related to local geography. In response, the research protocol was adjusted to prioritize in-person interviews, with exceptions made only when residency in Gunnison County could be clearly verified (e.g., use of a school email address). These procedures were implemented to protect the integrity of the sample and ensure the participants reflected the local population under study.

Participants

The study sample consisted of seven queer-identifying youth aged 14 to 18 years at the time of enrollment ($M=16.57$, $SD=1.81$). Participants were permitted to select multiple gender identity and sexual orientation categories and provide write-in responses. Sex assigned at birth intentionally was not collected being that gender identity was more relevant to the research questions. Gender identities represented in the sample included female ($n=3$), male ($n=3$), non-binary ($n=1$), unsure/questioning ($n=1$), and “Eldritch horror” (self-described; $n=1$). At the time of the interviews, three participants identified as transgender, three as cisgender, and one as questioning. Reported sexual orientations included asexual ($n=3$), bisexual ($n=3$), queer ($n=3$), pansexual ($n = 1$), and gay/homosexual ($n=1$).

All participants were enrolled in school at the time of the study. Four participants were high school students aged 14 to 17, with two attending GHS and two attending CBCS. The CBCS participants were slightly older on average and, like the GHS participants, were recruited through their schools’ GSAs, GHS Safe Space and CBCS SAGA. Among the high school cohort, two participants identified as local to Gunnison County and two as non-locals who relocated to the area during elementary or middle school from metropolitan and non-metropolitan towns. The remaining three participants were 18-year-old first-year undergraduate students at Western Colorado University; all identified as Colorado residents who grew up in metropolitan areas near Denver ($n=2$) or Pueblo ($n=1$). All participants reported growing up in regions of the American West including Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. See Table 1 for participant profiles and Table 2 for participant demographics.

Table 1*Participant profiles (n=7)*

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Trans ?	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Grade	School	Time in Gunnison County
Ronan	14	Male	Trans	Asexual; pansexual	Non-Hispanic white	9th	GHS	10+ years
Paloma	18	Female	Cis	Bisexual	Hispanic white	Undergraduate	Western	<1 year
Shredded Cheese (S.C.)	14	Female	Cis	Bisexual	Non-Hispanic white	9th	GHS	1-4 years
Ash	17	Non-binary	Trans	Asexual	Non-Hispanic white	10th	CBCS	10+ years
Leo	17	Male	Trans	Asexual; gay; queer	Non-Hispanic white	12th	CBCS	5-9 years
Riley	18	Female; "Eldritch horror"	Cis	Bisexual; queer	Non-Hispanic white	Undergraduate	Western	<1 year
Jay	18	Not sure; male	Not sure	Queer	Non-Hispanic white	Undergraduate	Western	<1 year

Note. *Trans reflects participants' self-identification at the time of interview. Sex assigned at birth was not collected. GHS = Gunnison High School; CBCS = Crested Butte Secondary School; Western = Western Colorado University.

Table 2*Participant Demographics (n = 7)*

Category	Characteristic	Total Count
Grade	9th	2
	10th	1
	11th	0
	12th	1
	First-year undergraduate	3
Race/Ethnicity	White, not Hispanic/Latino	6
	White, Hispanic/Latino	1
Gender Identity	Female	3
	Male	3
	Non-Binary	1
	"Eldritch horror"	1
	Not Sure	1
Transgender?	Cisgender	3
	Transgender	3
	Not Sure	1
Sexual Orientation	Asexual	3
	Bisexual	3
	Queer	3
	Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual	1
	Pansexual	1
Amount of Time	<1 year	3
Living in Gunnison County	1-4 years	1
	5-9 years	1
	>10 years	2

Note. Multiple responses and fill-in responses were allowed for gender identity and sexual orientation

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews designed to elicit participants' narratives of belonging while allowing flexibility for participants to guide the interview. Following each interview, participants completed the General Belongingness Scale (GBS; Malone et al., 2012) via an online survey to provide contextual support for qualitative findings (see Appendix D). The GBS captures achieved belonging in a variety of contexts via twelve items on a seven-point Likert scale. Interviews were scheduled via text or email and conducted by the principal investigator. During interviews with participants under 18 years old, there was a second adult trained in human subjects' research present to advocate for the participant and ensure safety. The second adult was either an MBS graduate student or a community partner. Minor participants were also encouraged to bring a peer or family advocate, as recommended by Newman and colleagues (2022), though none chose to do so. Interviews took place between September 2025 and February 2026, either in person (n=4) at public locations selected by participants (i.e., coffee shops) or via video call (n=3). Interviews lasted an average of 48 minutes and ranging from 34–71 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and followed an interview guide with questions regarding belonging across interpersonal relationships, school contexts, online spaces, and community life.

Prior to participation, all individuals were screened for eligibility and provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, confidentiality, potential risks, and consent procedures, which were reviewed both in writing and verbally before the interview (Dixon, 2015). Participants under 18 were given the option of independent minor assent or parental consent which is evidence that mandatory parental consent can bias participation or place LGBTQIA2S+ youth at risk (Nye et al. 2025; Schrager et al. 2019). All minors elected to waive

parental consent, and additional safeguards were implemented (i.e., frequent check-ins to assess participant comfort, presence of a secondary adult, thorough review of informed consent). After the verbal interview questions, participants completed a demographic and identity survey which allowed for the selection of multiple options and write-in responses for gender identity and sexual orientation (Hughes et al. 2021). See Appendices C and D for survey questions. Upon completion of the interview, participants received a digital \$15 Visa gift card and a resource guide for local basic needs and LGBTQIA2S+-affirming support. This study was approved by Western Colorado University's Institutional Review Board (HRC-2025-02-06-R34) on April 29, 2025.

Data Analysis

Survey data were cleaned and analyzed using JASP (JASP Team, 2025). Negatively worded items on the General Belongingness Scale (GBS) were reverse coded, and descriptive statistics were calculated. Inferential analyses were not conducted due to the small sample size. GBS total scores were used as a contextual indicator of perceived belonging and compared with interview data to assess consistency. While scores generally aligned with participants' narratives, they tended to reflect higher overall belonging and provided a limited snapshot, as the GBS measures general belonging and does not capture the multiple relational, institutional, and contextual dimensions explored qualitatively.

All interviews were transcribed from audio recordings, and all identifying information was redacted. Participants selected or guided the creation of their own pseudonyms via the post-interview survey, consistent with research emphasizing names as “key symbols of identity” (Itzik & Walsh, 2023, p. 705) important for participant agency (Lahman et al., 2015). In cases where participants provided descriptive preferences rather than a specific name, the principal investigator selected a pseudonym that met those criteria. Pseudonyms were reviewed with a community partner to avoid duplication with known local youth and were shared with participants for feedback prior to finalization.

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, an inductive analytic approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were first analyzed individually to understand each participant's narrative of belonging, supported by analytic memos, field notes, and reflexive writing (Riessman, 2008). Narrative codes and exemplar episodes were identified by participants then examined across participants to identify shared patterns and themes. The principal investigator conducted all coding and analysis, with ongoing consultation from a graduate

advisor and a community partner. Consistent with community-based research principles, participants were invited to review brief narrative profiles and offer feedback (Johnson, 2017). None of the participants responded to this request. During analysis, differences in developmental stage and sociocultural context between high school students and first-year university students became salient. Accordingly, themes were organized to reflect both shared experiences and subgroup-specific patterns. Final themes were iteratively reviewed against the transcripts to ensure analytic rigor, credibility, and relevance to the local Gunnison County community.

RESULTS

The seven queer youth in this study demonstrated high overall feelings of belonging with a mean total General Belongingness Scale (GBS) score of 59.57 (SD 16.44; range 26-74) on a 12 to 84-point scale (see Table 4 below). The lowest-rated items on the survey were in response to “I feel like an outsider” and “I feel as if people do not care about me” (both with $M=4.00$, $SD=1.73$ and 2.00 , respectively). Conversely, the highest-rated item, “I have close bonds with family and friends” scored highest ($M=5.86$, $SD=1.77$), indicated stronger feelings of belonging in close interpersonal relationships (see Table 3 below). These patterns align with other rural studies which find strong feelings of interpersonal connection with intermittent experiences of social isolation (Walker & Raval, 2017). These findings from the GBS aligned with participant descriptions of overall sense of belonging reported during the qualitative interview

Table 3
General Belongingness Scale (GBS) responses

Question	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Q1. When I am with other people, I feel included	5.29	1.25	3	6
Q2. I have close bonds with family and friends	5.86	1.77	2	7
Q3*. I feel like an outsider	4.00	1.73	1	6
Q4*. I feel as if people do not care about me	4.00	2.00	2	7
Q5. I feel accepted by others	5.00	1.53	2	6
Q6*. Because I do not belong, I feel distant during the holiday season	5.57	1.81	3	7
Q7*. I feel isolated from the rest of the world	4.86	2.27	1	7
Q8. I have a sense of belonging	5.14	1.77	2	7
Q9*. When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger	4.29	1.11	3	6
Q10. I have a place at the table with others	5.57	1.40	3	7
Q11. I feel connected with others	5.29	1.50	2	6
Q12*. Friends and family do not involve me in their plans	4.71	1.98	2	7
Total belongingness score	59.57	16.44	26	74

Note. *Negatively worded questions were reverse coded. All scores follow a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree (less belonging) to 7=Strongly Agree (more belonging).

Table 4
Total GBS scores

Participant	Total GBS Score	# Sds from avg	Level of Belonging
Ronan	56	-0.22	High belonging
Paloma	70	0.63	Very high belonging
Shredded Cheese (S.C.)	74	0.88	Very high belonging
Ash	67	0.45	High belonging
Leo	26	-2.04	Very low belonging
Riley	55	-0.28	High belonging
Jay	69	0.57	Very high belonging

Note. Total GBS scores were evaluated based on the score range (74 points) as follows: Very low belonging (12 to 26), low belonging (27 to 40), moderate belonging (41 to 54), high belonging (55 to 68), and very high belonging (69 to 84).

Thematic narrative analysis, guided by Lee and Robbins' (1995) indicators of belonging – companionship, affiliation, and connectedness – revealed five themes that together describe how queer youth experience belonging in Gunnison County. First, queer youth's *definitions of belonging* included feeling support, emotional safety, and freedom to authentically express themselves. Second, the *spaces that promote and constrain belonging* for queer youth included family, school, affinity spaces (i.e., GSAs, arts spaces, online) and findings underscore the importance of LGBTQIA2S+ affirming companionship for overall sense of belonging. Third, participant *narratives about the local community* describe a culture of “quiet acceptance” whereby queer youth feel tolerated or accepted by the community but remain marginalized and misunderstood as one of few queer people in town. Fourth, *life stage differences in belonging* emerged between queer high school and college students, particularly as primary sites of belonging shifted from family to peers in the transition to university. Fourth and finally, queer youth told *narratives of coping and resilience* as socio-emotional skills, auto-narrative, and agency helped them maintain a sense of companionship and connectedness despite challenges.

Definitions of Belonging

Queer youth defined a sense of belonging as feeling comfortable and encouraged to be their authentic selves which related to Lee and Robbins' (1995) concept of connectedness, or a felt sense of comfort and ease within one's social environment. For instance, Ronan (trans male, asexual and pansexual, 9th grade) defined belonging as "feeling comfortable where you are and with the people you're with and knowing that they're not going to judge you for being you," and S.C. (cis female, bisexual, 9th grade) said belonging is "being able to be comfortable within myself and the people around me." Jay (gender questioning/male, queer, undergraduate) echoed this sentiment, explaining that belonging meant "being able to brazenly be myself and not have to hide anything or avoid a topic." These descriptions point directly to comfort and authenticity as mediators of the sense of security and support that comprise connectedness. In contrast, experiences of bullying, exclusion, or invisibility, described as "being ignored, excluded," were associated with a breakdown of emotional safety and reduced connectedness and belonging.

Safety, trust, and inclusion were also central to youths' understanding of belonging and functioned as key indicators of connectedness. Participants consistently described belonging as contingent on emotional safety and the ability to express one's feelings openly, without fear of dismissal or harm. For example, S.C. explained that belonging meant "being able to express my emotions...if I'm mad...I can talk about it and people can help me out," pointing to the role of emotional support in belonging. Inclusion, or feeling welcomed into a relationship or scenario, was included in queer youths' definitions of belonging. For instance, Leo (trans male, asexual/gay/ queer, 12th grade) shared that belonging meant "feeling more welcomed anywhere...feeling important to the people around me, having them notice me and not keep me out," while Riley (female/Eldritch horror, bisexual/queer, undergraduate) defined it as "being

welcomed into a community and feeling loved and supported.” Youth avoided spaces and people they perceived to be unsafe, suspicious, or excluding. In other words, belonging and connectedness depended on predictable emotional safety within interpersonal and community relationships.

Finally, belonging was found in spaces of affinity whereby queer youth feel aligned with others based on shared norms, values, culture, experiences, identities, and interests. This was sometimes described as “fitting in” (Ash) or not “sticking out like a sore thumb” (Ash). Overwhelmingly, queer youth felt belonging where they perceived their LGBTQIA2S+ identities to be affirmed, often but not always with other members of the queer community. Jay illustrated the role of allies, people who are not part of the queer community but support it, in creating a sense of belonging. Jay found belonging with his friend who was open and accepting to Jay’s queerness although he was “very cis and straight and into a lot of country stuff” and “doesn’t really understand” Jay’s queerness. On the other hand, moments of misalignment (e.g., feeling different for being queer) were associated with a lack of belonging. For example, gender non-conforming youth like Jay felt heightened visibility:

In my classes I feel different, not necessarily a bad way, but...I’m one of three guys with long hair or I’m the only one here with pierced ears, the only one here who’s even minorly feminine besides the girls. (Jay)

Other examples include Paloma (cis female, bisexual, undergraduate) who felt different for not having similar outdoor recreation experiences to her peers, saying “that’s not something that I was ever able to do.” Additionally, Ronan was the only person on their team who was queer and who opted out of team prayers which left him alone “on the sidelines.” These narratives

underscore that belonging was found when queer youth perceived shared affinity, LGBTQIA2S+ acceptance, and safe to be their authentic selves.

Spaces that Promote and Constrain Belonging

Queer youth found belonging with people and in spaces they perceived to be safe and affirming of their LGBTQIA2S+ identities. Common sites of belonging included family, school, affinity spaces (i.e., GSAs, community arts), and online spaces. Participants often identified one or two close, supportive relationships which they relied on for companionship and connection which supported belonging even when other environments were exclusionary.

Family

Family emerged as a central site of belonging for queer youth. Understandably, family played a larger role in belonging for queer high school students, although all participants characterized family as highly important sources of connection and companionship. Sense of belonging in one's family was strongest when queer identities were known, accepted, and affirmed which increased feelings of emotional safety and closeness. For example, S.C. described coming out to her mother as "a big weight off my chest" that brought relief and closeness, explaining "we had more to talk about...we can share that with each other." Most queer youth felt closeness with at least one accepting family member, strengthened feelings of support and connection across other areas of life. In contrast, participants who experienced rejection or distance in their home lives home described reduced belonging across areas of their life. A transgender high school student, Leo, reflected on the lack of acceptance he feels in his family, saying:

"I'm disappointed. I do think about it occasionally, and it makes me sad. I do like having family who I can rely on and be with. It's nice to have people like that, obviously. Whenever you feel emotionally distant or excluded from your family because of a reason like that – just for being myself – it makes me question things about myself and about everyone. It feels so much easier before I came out in this family. They seemed not to question me as much, or they seemed to enjoy being around me whenever I was home.

But it's taken a while for me to realize that I'm much happier just being with myself and not constantly worrying about whatever they're thinking. I'm disappointed, obviously, that I can't be with them as much as I'd like to emotionally, but I'm happy that I don't have to deal with them being around me at all." (Leo)

This lack of acceptance in Leo's family disrupted belonging as it eroded emotional connectedness and security in their relationship.

A pattern emerged in which queer youth described more often feeling accepted and supported by their mothers than their fathers. Among six participants who were out to their families, four described mothers who were accepting of their LGBTQIA2S+ identity compared to only two fathers. See Table 5 below.

Table 5
LGBTQIA2S+ acceptance among participant's parents/guardians

Participant	Mother	Father
Ronan	Accepting	Unaccepting
Paloma	n/a	n/a
Shredded Cheese (S.C.)	Accepting	Unaccepting
Ash	Accepting	Accepting
Leo	Unaccepting	Unaccepting
Riley	Accepting	Accepting
Jay	Unaccepting	n/a

Note. n/a describes participants who did not mention that parent or are not out as LGBTQIA2S+

School

Schools, where queer youth spend much of their days, functioned as important sites of belonging. However, queer youth varied in the degree to which they valued school as a source of connection, companionship, and affiliation. For instance, school was a very important site of belonging for high school student S.C. who stated, "if I don't have school, I don't have a life," meaning that her friendships and social life orbit school. In contrast, high school student Ronan placed more value on his friendships than the institution itself for belonging. When asked to

describe the the degree to which school mattered to him, he said “not super on a wide scale...as long as I have friends I’ll feel generally pretty comfortable.”

Queer youth consistently described school as space marked by homophobic and transphobic bullying, discrimination, stigma, and exclusion. These experiences were described as most severe in elementary and middle school and reduced by late high school and early college. While queer Western students had more independence to avoid unaccepting peers, several college-aged participants described similar experiences of exclusion among their peers while in high school which continued to impact their relationships. Ash (non-binary, asexual, 10th grade) described school as one of the few places where they regularly felt a lack of belonging, explaining “it’s really kids inside of school who are still learning and growing that tend to make you feel like you don’t belong...[it’s] odd to spend a bunch of time at school where I don’t have a lot of friends.” Another high school student, Leo, described social fragmentation at school where “just huddle together” in cliques which made him feel “pushed to the side and left out.” These experiences of school bullying, which reduced feelings of connectedness and constrained belonging, will be discussed further in the section on life stage differences.

Affinity Spaces

Queer youth often felt a sense of belonging in affinity spaces – places where they shared values, identities, beliefs, lived experiences, and interests with others – which encouraged self-expression and accepted their queerness. Examples including queer affinity spaces (e.g., GSAs), community arts spaces, and online spaces increased feelings of connection and expanded opportunities for companionship.

Queer affinity spaces. Queer affinity spaces are places where queer youth can interact with other queer-identifying youth and allies. The most common site of queer affinity was school-based clubs called Gender-Sexuality Alliances or Gay-Straight Alliances (i.e., GSAs) which included GHS Safe Space⁸, CBCS Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA), and Western Queer Alliance. These clubs are typically open to queer-identifying students and their allies. The high school clubs meet during lunch as spaces to hang out and talk to other queer-identifying students, occasionally going on field trips and attending diversity conferences. Western Queer Collective functions as a university club that typically hosts mixers and community-building events. Queer youth valued these spaces as important sites of belonging. For example, S.C. said, “I feel like I belong in Safe Space because we’re all similar.” Ash described their GSA as “a space where nobody can come and bother us,” which was particularly important for them in a small school where “people know how to press your buttons”.

Beyond GSAs, queer youth found queer affinity among their queer peers outside of school. Participants often described positive feelings of connection and affinity when they saw other visibly queer people in their community. There is no one way to look queer, but queer people often signal their identities through appearance, behavior, and speech patterns. This is articulated by transgender high school student Leo who associated alternative aesthetics with queerness, saying:

“With looking queer, it’s kind of hard to describe what that is, because I’d say alt is what’s most commonly— because being alternative is really, really common in the queer community, people are just automatically like “are you gay?” whenever you’re alternative.” (Leo)

⁸ Safe Space is intended to be an inclusive and accepting space for all students at GHS and does not market itself as a club for LGBTQIA2S+ students only, though many of the club’s members are in the queer community.

Queer youth vary in their ability to identify other queer people which impacted their ability to find queer affinity. Young people who were newer to their queer identities and less experienced with the queer community had more difficulty evaluating visual symbols of queerness and, instead, relied on more direct verbal cues (e.g., self-identification as queer). When queer youth identify other queer people in the community, they described a feeling of connection due to the overall lack of queer visibility in the community. Queer college student, Jay, who was questioning her gender described this feeling of connection when she sees other queer people on campus:

“I noticed the general student population just as pretty gender conforming, not many visibly queer people. I know a few people who I would consider pretty visibly queer and I feel like I belong with them a little bit” (Jay)

The final source of queer affinity was found in the home for queer youth with queer-identified siblings and family members. Queer youth felt a strong sense of belonging with their queer siblings with whom they learned about queer history and context, shared similar experiences navigating their relationship to their parent(s), and could connect without having to explain queerness to each other. For instance, Ronan described feeling accepted by and learning from his queer older sibling, saying:

“My sister is queer, as well, she obviously accepts me...I fully realized I was queer when I was in fourth or fifth grade. I didn't know anything about it, but my sister did, and she educated me a decent amount. I never heard the term transgender before that, and she told me what it was. When I was in fifth grade, that's when I fully realized that's what I was.”
(Ronan)

Additionally, Jay described feeling especially close to their older sister who is transgender, saying “I feel like it's easy to talk about a lot of things on my mind. I feel like she can get them a lot easier than my [cis] sister,” highlighting how shared identity facilitated mutual understanding and connection. Queer affinity spaces enable queer youth to connect with the broader queer community, explore their identities, and connect on the shared experience of queerness.

Community arts spaces. Queer youths' definitions of belongings emphasized the importance of authentic self-expression in facilitating feelings of belonging, which was also found in Gonzales and colleagues (2022) study of belonging among urban Latinx queer youth. Community arts spaces – including theater, dance, music, film, visual arts, and tabletop role playing games (e.g., Dungeons and Dragons) – allowed for authenticity, play, and interest-based affinity. One participant⁹ described jam circles as their “favorite thing ever” because they could “walk into a jam circle, know nobody’s name, and just start playing music with people,” illustrating how belonging could emerge through participation rather than prior relationship. Additionally, several participants described feeling belonging in community theater where they could connect with people of different ages and backgrounds and express themselves through different characters. For instance, one participant said:

“I think community theater is super important because it’s such an easy way to make new friends and meet new people because so many people do it, even if they aren’t in school or are 50 years old. Everyone I’ve done community theater with is super nice, and it’s just such a fun experience, and I love acting.”

These stories illustrate how artistic and creative expression can increase opportunities for connection, facilitate identity exploration, and build queer youths' confidence as they are affirmed in their aesthetic preferences and interests.

Online spaces. Finally, online spaces were described as important sites of belonging for three out of the seven queer youth represented in this study. This was surprising given the rise in digital technologies and association of younger generations with social media and phone usage. Although every participant did utilize the Internet and digital devices, most reported using their devices primarily for school assignments, content streaming (e.g., YouTube, Netflix), and for communication with friends and families (e.g., phone call, texting, online games, video call).

⁹ Due to the small size of Gunnison County, I have de-identified the quotes in this section to protect participant identity.

Some youth did not care to spend more time online due to “horror stories” of negative encounters, lack of interest, and preference for in-person connection.

One participant critiqued online spaces as deterrents for more authentic connection.

Interestingly, this was a participant who also described online spaces as important for their sense of belonging. Regarding the Internet and online spaces, they said:

“[It’s] part of feeling like I belong... It pushes people to be on their own on the Internet and huddled up in their rooms on their phones all day instead of talking to people around them when they’re bored, instead of talking to the person next to them...partially because of the Internet...also an individualistic culture in America.” (Jay)

However, online spaces significantly expanded opportunities for belonging for the queer youth who were interested in online spaces, especially for those whose in-person environments felt unsafe or isolating. For them, online platforms – including Discord, Tumblr, Archive of Our Own (AO3), TikTok, Wattpad – enabled them to find connection through shared interests and online sub-culture. For instance, one participant described the contrast between his offline and online experiences, noting that he felt “actually listened to” online, saying:

“I do struggle emotionally with a lot of stuff, way more in person, in real life, in school. [Online] people relate to me and actually enjoy talking and being with me, and I’m pretty popular, in general, with the community I’m in. It’s weird going from being bullied and being a quiet kid to being popular somewhere else. It’s crazy but it feels good to be able to- if I didn’t have that online space, I wouldn’t have met all my good friends and my boyfriend or anything like that. I feel like I belong a lot... I feel like I’m actually listened to and belong somewhere, finally.” (Leo)

Additionally, Riley who described herself as “chronically online”¹⁰, found online relationships to be deeply important and explained that it was “easier to maintain friendships online because you can pick who you are, but it’s no less authentic” and that “slower” paced online interactions allowed “stronger relationships ” to develop over time. Together, these findings show that

¹⁰ Chronically online (“extremely online” or “terminally online”) refers to an individual who spends much of their time online and closely monitors Internet culture. In extreme circumstances these individuals may struggle to disengage with online spaces.

belonging was fostered in queer affinity, community arts, and online spaces which encouraged self-expression, affirmed queerness, and increased opportunities for connection.

Narratives About Local Community

Community of “Middle-Ground People”

Queer youth generally described the Gunnison Valley as welcoming, accepting, and tolerant to the queer community. One participant characterized Crested Butte as “so accepting and just overall amazing...there’s a bunch of events where the community just is like one big, giant family. It makes me feel very included.” Additionally, queer youth felt appreciation for the natural environment and rhythm of small-town life, referencing the “sagebrush”, “stars and quiet”, and quaint experience of “just walking around town.” Queer youth rarely avoided areas of town and frequented local businesses – including coffee shops (e.g., Mocha’s Coffeehouse and Bakery, Rumors Coffee and Tea), restaurants (e.g., Power Stop, Jermaine’s), public libraries, and community arts spaces (e.g., Gunnison Art Center).

When compared to their expectations of rurality, queer youth were pleasantly surprised by the friendliness of the local community. Queer youth framed Gunnison County as more accepting than other rural places which they characterized by stereotypes of conservatism and religious fundamentalism. One participant explained:

“Other rural areas tend to have farmers and ranchers and lean more towards Christianity and are more against it [queerness]. I certainly feel like other rural areas are not as accepting as Gunnison, and I’m sure cities have their unaccepting and accepting parts too.” (Ronan)

Several participants described entering the community with apprehension, Paloma saying she felt “a little bit nervous...in most of the country, communities that are like this one might be more conservative. I was expecting a little more close-minded.” Similarly, Jay moved to Gunnison from outside of Denver and described expecting rural spaces to be “apprehensive to people like me,” meaning queer and gender nonconforming people. Jay went on to say:

“I feel comfortable being visibly queer here. I don’t feel like I have to worry. I’d be more worried about getting attacked for being visibly queer [near Denver]. I’m used to people who are more extreme, less middle-ground people. It’s either like ‘we accept you and you know we’re allies’ or ‘we hate you and we’ll punch you for being gay’. That’s what I feel like I’m used to. I either have to hide it around someone and pretend I’m straight or it doesn’t matter at all. This feels like there’s a lot more middle ground people. It’s not what I’m used to.” (Jay)

For one participant who moved from a metropolitan area in Texas, the Gunnison Valley increased his feelings of physical safety and autonomy. He described being “able to go be independent, walk around town as I want to,” which he contrasted with feeling unsafe doing so in Texas. However, his sense of belonging was constrained by housing instability and financial strain, noting that “housing has been an issue for us, especially living here.” This account illustrates how individual circumstances complicate otherwise positive evaluations of community belonging.

Culture of Quiet Acceptance

Queer youth appreciate Gunnison County for its physical safety general acceptance toward the queer community but still feel marginalized for their queerness. I call this a culture of “quiet acceptance” whereby the community tolerates queer youth, but this sense of indifference fails to adequately include them in the greater community thereby constraining belonging to specific people and places. Most participants described the community as indifferent toward their queerness saying things like:

“I feel like I belong just because everyone’s so accepting. They don’t really care, I’m mainly talking about outside of school, but they don’t really care who you are.” (Ash)

“I’ll mention a pronoun and toss a pronoun out there, and people will continue on with it” (Riley)

“Most people would probably be accepting where they just wouldn’t care like it’s not their business.” (Jay)

“Even if they don’t support it, they’re not going to say anything about it. Some people do, but most people don’t.” (Ronan)

While the community’s lack of concern about queer youth reduced fear of harassment, it also led participants to rely on their queer peers and trusted allies for belonging rather than the broader community. Moreover, queer youth often felt uncertainty about whether a member of the community was accepting of their queerness due to a lack of open dialogue about queerness. For example, one participant associated religious affiliation with a lack of acceptance of the queer community due to their past experiences with the church. When describing a director for an art program they’re involved in, they said, “I don’t know how accepting she is. She’s Mormon so I don’t know.” This highlights how tolerance toward queerness is not enough to create connectedness, while direct examples of affirmation and allyship promoted belonging.

The consequences of this culture of “quiet acceptance” are particularly impactful for transgender and gender non-conforming youth who felt heightened visibility due to their gender presentation. One transgender high school student described this feeling of heightened perception, describing how community members alternated between staring at him, asking him questions like “are you a boy or a girl,” misgendering him, or “just not really caring.” He described moments of affirmation when strangers affirmed his gender, stating, “it feels good, I like that people know.” Although ambiguity was preferable to harassment (“it’s better than being teased or bullied”), his experience of navigating transgender visibility in a small town contributed to feelings of exclusion. He said:

“There’s some people don’t really notice or care and some people are like [makes a wide eyed look], you know? Whenever I was younger, it was harder, especially when I first came out because I just had a pixie haircut and dyed my hair all the time. I was a bit more alternative, in general, but I was still more feminine. Occasionally I’d get questions like, “are you a boy or a girl?” and I was like, “ooh”. I was non-binary for a really long time but then, eventually, realized “oh, I’m a dude”. After that, specifically, I think I’ve made it more noticeable. A lot of the time, even if I’m just out in town, people will call me “he” and I’m like “me?” It feels good. I like that people know. If people ask, I’m going to tell

them. I don't hide it or anything. Most of the time people can just tell when looking at me, depending. If they do ask, I'm going to tell them and not try to beat around the bush. Sometimes people just can't really tell or don't really care or don't notice it. Sometimes people have their suspicions. Some people just tell and know and jump to conclusions." (Leo)

These accounts show that joy can be found when queer youth feel confident and secure in their transness or queerness; however, this joy is often felt in isolation amid a community whose support tends to extend only toward tolerance.

Visually Heteronormative and Homogenous Community

Queer youth emphasized the importance of seeing visibly queer people and people of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in promoting inclusion and fostering a stronger sense of belonging. While some youth felt there was "a decent amount of people in Gunnison that are queer" (Ronan), others described the community as "pretty gender conforming...not many visibly queer people" (Jay). Outside of the annual Pride picnic ("we have a pride picnic every year which is a lot of fun"), Ash noted, "I don't see anyone in the [queer] community." Queer visibility was often associated with symbols and performances associated with queerness for their age cohort, including alternative styles and non-normative presentation. Riley reflected, "I have dyed hair and so many piercings... I forget that I am visibly queer but I probably am." Leo similarly linked queerness with alternative aesthetics, explaining I feel like a lot of alternative people are in the queer community ("It just goes hand-in-hand with each other"). However, the lack of diversity heightened feelings of marginality, particularly for high school students in Crested Butte. Ash reflected on attending a school where "everyone's white" and being "one of like five people who are in the LGBTQ community," describing this as "very odd" and connecting it to experiences of bullying. They attributed this to homogeneity, stating, "people don't like difference because everyone is the same in our town and in our school,"

adding that “there’s a lot of racism, too. It’s not just homophobia.” When imagining an ideal future, queer youth consistently hoped for increased diversity and more queer-specific spaces. Riley suggested, “maybe there’s a gay bar,” while Ash emphasized, “I think it’d be cool to see more diversity in this whole town... I think people would become more accepting and more accustomed to it.” These accounts emphasize a shared value among queer youth – inclusion – which can be fostered through cultural awareness and encounters with people of different backgrounds, highlighting the importance of programs which promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Life Stage Differences in Belonging

Queer High School Students

Queer high school student narratives reflected a coming-of-age process characterized by negotiating queer identity, experimenting with gender expression, coming out, and actively searching for sites of belonging. Family figured prominently in these accounts as both unavoidable and emotionally significant. As Ronan explained, “it’s not like I can unfamily them,” underscoring how high school students are dependent on their family as a source of connection and companionship. Most participants described feeling belonging with at least one family member, especially mothers, queer-identifying siblings, and pets, which increased confidence and emotional safety. For example, S.C. described her mother as someone who supports not only her own children but others as well, saying, “My mom...she’s the type of person where if you don’t have good parents or if your parents have passed or if you don’t have one good parent, she’ll be that extra parent.” Ronan emphasized acceptance from both his mother and queer sister, explaining “My sister is queer, as well, she, obviously, accepts me...my mom is a really accepting person as well.” While Ash repeatedly expressed gratitude for their supportive parents, stating:

“My parents are super accepting, which is awesome. Yeah, they’re super supportive – I love my parents – and so is my dog, obviously. I have super supportive parents, and I feel really lucky that I have the parents that I do. I really appreciate how awesome they are.”
(Ash)

However, queer youth frequently described strained relationships with fathers and extended family members, particularly those with strong religious or conservative beliefs. Ronan shared that although his father “used to be super accepting,” he no longer felt safe coming out to him, explaining “now he’s not super accepting so I haven’t come out to him.” Similarly, S.C. described growing up with a homophobic father who she felt unsafe coming out to, saying:

“I came out right after we got out of the home with my dad. My dad’s a very homophobic person. He’s always jammed into me and my brother’s heads that it’s wrong and bad, and I would sit there like ‘sure...yeah...’ [makes disapproving look]. He would tell us, ‘Yeah, we’ll accept you. It doesn’t matter. We’ll accept you’ but ‘if you’re gay, I’m disowning you.’ I don’t, I wouldn’t, I didn’t understand it. I didn’t understand him.” (S.C.)

Additionally, Leo described feeling consistently disconnected from extended family, saying:

"Whenever I talked to them, I felt distant. I never felt really [pause] like they could get me that much. A lot of them don’t know about me, in general. I have to mask and hide around them." (Leo)

These experiences with his “conservative” and “not the most open-minded” family members left Leo feeling “disconnected” and disappointed, he said, “I wish they were more open-minded and could understand that I’m a different person, that I have needs and stuff like that, too.” These experiences reduced belonging and increased self-doubt, often pushing participants to emotionally distance themselves from family members to protect their well-being.

School emerged as another critical site of potential belonging and unbelonging for high school students. While participants described improvements in peer bullying from middle school to high school explained by increased emotional maturity, school remained a place where queer identity shaped daily experiences. Leo reflected on middle school as especially difficult, saying, “I was in the middle of figuring out who I was and barely coming out, too. I was a mess... I used to get bullied a lot,” but noted that “high school juniors and seniors are a bit better,” attributing reduced teasing to developmental growth (“everyone around me has at least matured a little bit”). Within high schools, GSAs (i.e., Safe Space, SAGA) functioned as important sanctuary spaces. Ash described these spaces simply as places where “it’s nice to have a space for people in the community to hang out.” At Gunnison High School, participants described lingering homophobia and “internalized homophobia” (Ronan) among peers, which reduced belonging, Ronan said it made him “feel a little less comfortable and a little less belong-ethed.”

Queer students at CBCS described intense bullying that began in elementary school and had little intervention from school staff. Ash recounted how their queer-identified friends were bullied so persistently in elementary school that they eventually moved away, explaining:

“Way back in elementary school I was really good friends with a couple of boys, then we grew up and went to middle school, and they started bullying all of my friends – a different group of friends that were gay...Then, eventually, my friends in the LGBTQ community got so fed up that they moved away. I was like, ‘I can’t go back to these friends because they’re being awful’ so I was just in this weird place when I got to high school...We went to the teachers a lot but they didn’t really do anything. They just said ‘hey, stop’ and they didn’t do any more. They threatened punishments but never actually punished people, whatever that might be, detention. Which I thought was kind of strange.” (Ash)

Similarly, Leo described leaving peer groups where he said, “I couldn’t be myself and even in that group I was picked on because I was so different from them for a lot of reasons.” Overall, school and family were the most important sites of companionship for queer high schoolers with school bullying and a lack of acceptance from family members significantly reducing sense of belonging.

Queer College Students

Queer college students described Western as a “liberal arts school” (Paloma) in a “beautiful, tiny mountain town in the middle of nowhere,” (Riley) which provided anonymity and opportunity to redefine identity. This life stage was characterized by increased freedom to express and explore queerness. Physical distance from family and hometown peers enabled new forms of visibility. Jay explained, “I’ve become visibly queer,” going on to say:

“I’ve gotten earrings...I’ve been growing my hair, my ponytails, I started wearing mascara and lip gloss a little bit. I feel kind of comfortable being visible queer here. I don’t feel like I have to worry. I’d be more worried about getting attacked for being visibly queer [near Denver] I’m used to people who are more extreme...it feels like there’s a lot of middle ground people [in Gunnison]. It’s not what I’m used to.” (Jay)

Additionally, Paloma described feeling more comfortable being queer in Gunnison due to newcomer anonymity, saying, “not a lot of people know me, and I don’t really care what they think.”

Queer college students noted newfound challenges of rural life which included isolation and repetitiveness. Riley stated, “there’s not a lot nearby so it can get very lonely,” while Jay described feeling like he was “always in the same place.” Additionally, Riley described the awkward experience of “going through a breakup in a small town” during which she was unable to avoid running into this ex on a small college campus and feeling which made the experience feel “not easy.” Nonetheless, participants largely described Gunnison as welcoming. Paloma stated, “everybody’s very open-minded,” while Riley emphasized that people had been “really kind” and that she felt “very welcoming,” and Jay appreciated the “outdoorsy” opportunities available in Gunnison. Unlike queer high school students, college students did not engage with the broader Gunnison community as they were immersed in the micro-community on Western’s campus. Paloma explained, “I haven’t been out in Gunnison very often, I’ve just been around campus.” This reliance on a small social environment intensified relational challenges. Paloma described disconnection from dorm peers, and Riley described the emotional difficulty of going through a breakup in a small town where social circles overlapped.

During this transition to a new community and toward peers as a primary source of belonging, queer college students relied more on affinity based on political beliefs, ethical values, and shared interest. Moreover, college-aged students were more politically concerned than high school students. For instance, Jay described their beliefs surrounding the politics of community and individualistic culture in the United States, saying:

“I don’t have community in the sense that I feel like even if people don’t like me, I don’t know that they’d have my back. I see jokes that people in Chicago are like that. I don’t

know if that's true, but I saw a joke where this guy's complaining about how much he absolutely hates his neighbor. He's like 'God, I wish you would just leave', then an ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agent comes by asking 'Do you know about him?' and it's like 'What? Are you talking about my neighbor? You want to come after my neighbor?' That's the idea of what community means." (Jay)

This articulates a pattern of increased political involvement and concern for the political climate for queer college students. When asked what their ideal world would look like, one participant said, "an ideal would be one where people are not casually homophobic...like a world where they didn't do a Turning Point USA¹¹ club here" (Riley). Queer college students were increasingly concerned with the recent political climate of increasing conservatism and Christian nationalism in the United States, which has targeted LGBTQIA2S+ rights (Tebaldi & Gaddini, 2024).

As queer first-year college students transition to new class schedules, on-campus residency, increased reliance on their peers for connection and companionship, and expanded exploration of their queerness, they navigate the question – *with whom can I find belonging?*

¹¹ Turning Point USA is an organization founded in 2012 by the late Charlie Kirk known for its recruitment of youth to the conservative Christian nationalist movement, particularly through college campus (Tebaldi & Gaddini, 2024).

Narratives for Coping and Resilience

Queer youth demonstrated varying abilities for coping and resilience through their auto-narratives, particularly through socio-emotional skills, gender-affirming self-expression, and coming out processes. These tools for coping improved relationships, protected youth from negative situations, and increased resilience which promoted an overall sense of belonging.

Socio-emotional Skills

Socio-emotional skills – including self-awareness (e.g., responsibility), self-management (e.g., emotional regulation), relationship skills (e.g., empathy, trust), social awareness (e.g., tolerance, curiosity), and responsible decision-making – improve relationships and promote resilience through adversity (Amadori et al., 2023). Although this study did not intend to examine socio-emotional skills, they emerged as a relevant theme in how participants recounted their lived experience, particularly surrounding experiences of adversity. One participant, with particularly strong socio-emotional skills, described shifting attention from unhealthy relationships to relationships that promote belonging, saying:

“I’m trying to get out of those and hang out with friends who are not super toxic, accept me, and make me feel like they want me around, instead of just me tagging along.”

He continued to describe ways he responds to homophobia and transphobia among peers at school, saying:

“I typically just walk away from the conversation because it's not something I want to talk about... I feel like there isn't much because a lot has to do with their upbringing, how our parents view it, and how they feel about themselves. There's not much other people can do about that.”

“There’s a few people who are ignorant to it and use the word gay, like ‘oh that’s gay’, like to refer to something bad. I’m like, ‘Okay...don’t do that. That’s not nice.’”

During this interview, the participant did not appear particularly bothered by these experiences. To be clear, this is not because the participant did not care about toxic relationships, internalized homophobia, or stigmatized language. Instead, this participant used socio-emotional skills – achievement motivation (i.e., seeking out healthy relationships), self-control (i.e., walking away from potentially harmful situations rather than negatively engaging), social awareness (i.e., understanding one’s own locus of control, not taking experiences personally), and assertiveness (i.e., directly responding to inappropriate behavior) – to mitigate the potentially negative consequences of these situations.

This study did not intend to explore the topic of socio-emotional skills and findings were limited. It was unclear exactly how queer youth developed these socioemotional skills, as interview questions did not explicitly explore these histories, but possible explanations include personality differences, developmental histories, mental health histories and experiences of socio-emotional education. However, the data suggest a gap in socio-emotional skills between participants with particularly strong resilience and participants who explicitly mentioned having mental health issues (e.g., social anxiety, depression). Queer youth with mental health disorder displayed reduced optimism, persistence, curiosity, trust, sociability, and stress resistance. For instance, when a participant with social anxiety was asked if they feel like they can be themselves when they walk down the street, they said:

“Let me use an instance like walking down the street. That, in my opinion, is scary. I have this thing where I feel like everyone’s out to get me so if I pass by someone, I feel like they’re going to turn around and put me in a chokehold or something. I get freaked out. I hate it. But if I’m with someone, I feel really fine. But walking down the street by yourself [pauses] it’s kind of scary. I don’t know why. It’s just kind of scary. Yeah. [Pauses] Then I feel like people are judging me, like people drive by and are like ‘look at what this chick is doing.’” (S.C.)

The findings suggest there may be a relationship between socio-emotional skills, mental health and developmental history, and a sense of belonging. Additional research is needed to better understand this dynamic, but it could be useful to study, especially in connection to the socio-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum implemented in GWSD schools.

Gender-Affirming Self-Expression

Transgender youth demonstrated a desire to express themselves authentically and in ways that affirmed their gender identities. Queer youth described complicated experiences surrounding self-expression in a cisnormative environment. However, belonging was promoted when youth appeared and behaved in ways that felt authentic and unrestrained, especially if these expressions were affirmed. At times queer youth expressed the joy of gender and sexuality-affirming self-expression amid doubt and disapproval. Examples include:

“Sometimes I just hide it [his transness] or dress more normal, just so I’m not noticed as much, but I try not to care as much anymore. If I want to dress cool, then I can dress cool. I’m getting my hair done again soon, like next weekend or something. I’m gonna finally be how I used to be, where I didn’t care about what people saw...It’s taken a while for me to realize that I’m much happier just being myself.” (Leo)

“I remember like around freshman year of high school, I started to kind of realize like I really, would prefer to dress more femininely. I couldn’t really because a lot of people in that area were sort of apprehensive to that and also my mom was, so I just resigned to painting my nails and growing out my hair...More recently, I’ve become visibly queer. I’ve gotten earrings in October, I’ve been growing my hair, my ponytails, I’ve started wearing mascara and lip gloss...” (Jay)

As demonstrated in the above statement by Jay, it is common for transgender youth to come out incrementally by changing their name, pronouns, appearance, and identity labels at different times and multiple times throughout their transition. This speaks to the fluidity of gender and stigma surrounding certain identity labels. For instance, Ash changed their pronouns before their name and explained how their parents reacted, saying:

“I changed my pronouns first, and it took them a little bit to get used to it, but they tried, you know. They accepted the fact that I wanted to change my pronouns and tried their best. But with my name, it was a little different, because my mom was so attached to my old name, and she really didn’t want me to go by different names. So I was a little scared to tell her but once I did it she as super accepting.” (Ash)

Additionally, Ronan came out as non-binary before coming out as transmasculine, saying:

“I used to have really long hair I got cut off, as you could tell. I cut it off a while before coming out. I have generally dressed pretty masculine for the majority of my life...Then I officially came out as trans six months ago, but it's relatively obvious before. Before that, I identified as non-binary.” (Ronan)

These accounts illustrate how transgender participants navigate exploration of their gender identity in stages, using appearance as a flexible and reversible form of self-exploration.

Transgender youth describe early experimentation with gender expression as a way of testing safety and self-recognition. Gender expression and performance is life affirming for transgender youth.

Coming Out and Selective Disclosure

Lastly, every participant shared one or more coming out story. Queer youth described choosing when, how, and to whom they disclosed their identities, often coming out multiple times as their language and self-understanding evolved. Similar to self-expression, coming out was a critical process to promoting a sense of belonging for queer youth. The process of coming out is ongoing for queer youth in a society that assumes they are cisgender and straight. In many instances, queer youth did not need to explicitly come out in relationships where the other person assumed their queerness but coming out erased ambiguity and improved belonging. The coming out narratives below demonstrate how disclosure of one’s queer identity can increase feelings of connectedness and improve relationships when met with acceptance:

“I never officially came out for being pan, but it was pretty obvious, and both my parents knew since I was in fourth or fifth grade. Then I officially came out as trans six months ago but it's relatively obvious before. Before that, I identified as non-binary.” (Ronan)

“I went to a summit thing at Western....I got a pin and I went home, and she [mom] was asking me about it, and she was like ‘What was it like? What was it like? Was it fun?’, and I was like ‘Yeah, I gotta tell you something.’ I threw the pin at her... She was like, ‘I knew this.’ I didn’t know it was that transparent...I know that she’s always been super accepting. I knew that if I went and told her she wasn’t going to be disappointed.” (S.C.)

“Recently, a couple of weeks ago, I told my best friend that I was questioning my gender. We’ve had jokes in my friend group that I’m gonna be transitioned to a woman for like two years now. A lot of my online friends, they’ve known for like a couple months about that too.” (Jay)

Queer youth practices selective disclosure, or intentionally choosing not to come out, in situations where they felt their LGBTQIA2S+ identity would not be accepted. Youth framed these decisions not as avoidance but as necessary boundaries to ensure their safety and reduce potential harm. Thus, selective disclosure acted as a tool for queer youth to focus their belonging in places where they felt affirmed while leaving unaccepting relationships in stasis. Below are stories of selective disclosure and the complicating feelings it evokes in queer youth:

“I have jokes that she [mom] will find out I like guys when I invite her to my wedding. I’ve made that joke a couple times. I don’t think I’m gonna do that, that’s a bad idea. I think maybe after college just full separation. It’s a little easier after I’m fully moved out, fully independent, might make that just a little bit easier...Being trans, if I’m ever fully like ‘yeah I’m a woman’, I think- I don’t know how I’m gonna do that. I’ll definitely wait until I’m fully independent, I don’t think there’s any question about that ‘cause there’s definitely a rift between my mom and my [trans] sister that there wasn’t before now. I don’t really want that, so I don’t know how to deal with that.” (Jay)

“I came out right after we got out of the home with my dad, and my dad’s a very homophobic person. He’s always jammed into me and my brother’s heads that it’s wrong and bad and I would sit there like “sure, yeah” [shrugs]. It’s still kind of rotating in my brother’s head...My papa and my grandma, they’re heavy Christians. I’m Christian, too, everyone should understand that, but I have no idea how they would react and I’m kind of scared to know how they would react. I’ve never heard them say anything like anything that my dad would say, you know? I’ve never heard anything, but I have no idea how they react, and that unknowingness kind of scares me.” (S.C.)

“My parents are divorced. My dad got married a few years ago and moved to [another state], so I don't see him a ton. He used to be super accepting, but now he's not super accepting so I haven't come out to him.” (Ronan)

One participant had not come out to her parents, who she expected to be accepting, because she was still coming to understand her bisexual identity and did not yet feel ready to have the conversation. She said:

“Some of my cousins know, but my parents don't know. It's not on them, they wouldn't care. I'm not ready for that, I guess... I think being out to my whole family [is what I want], I guess, specifically my sisters. I know that they won't care but it's just so hard, I guess. I think just everybody knowing, it would make me feel a lot better, I guess.... I think everybody can tell me they won't care, but that doesn't really change anything for me. It's still going to be hard. I think knowing that it will be fine doesn't really help because you're still afraid that that's not going to happen, you know?” (Paloma)

These accounts highlight the factors that influence a youth's decision to come out which, when met with acceptance, improved belonging. Although selective disclosure did not improve belonging, it emerged as an essential skill to protect overall well-being. Across narratives, resilience appeared not as the absence of adversity but as intentional navigation of risk, relationships, and self-expression. Participants used selective disclosure, boundary-setting, relationship building, and self-reflection to maintain belonging and protect emotional well-being. The ways queer youth told their stories reveal ongoing processes of meaning-making and agency that support coping amid uncertainty and constraint.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This study explored the factors that promote and constrain sense of belonging among queer-identified youth in rural Gunnison County, Colorado guided by several theoretical frameworks – minority stress (Meyer, 2003), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), strengths-based approach (Gates & Kelly, 2017), Lee and Robbins’ (1995) concept of belonging, and narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008). The findings illustrate how rural queer youth construct a sense of belonging in a culture of “quiet acceptance” whereby queerness is often tolerated but not celebrated. Belonging was found in spaces that affirmed queerness, encouraged authentic self-expression, and shared queer youths’ values, beliefs, and interests. The findings support Lee and Robbins’ (1995) core dimensions of belonging – companionship, affiliation, and connectedness – with affiliation and connectedness as particularly salient to queer youth belonging. Moreover, queer youth emphasized authentic self-expression as a key aspect of belonging which corroborates Gonzales and colleagues’ (2022) expansion of Lee and Robbins’ (1995) work to include “authenticity” in their study of belonging among urban Latinx youth.

Participants defined belonging as emotional safety (e.g., “being able to express my emotions”), authenticity (e.g., “being brazenly myself”), feeling valued (e.g., “feeling important to the people around me”), feeling comfortable, and non-judgement. Conversely, queer youth associated a lack of belonging with experiences of bullying, exclusion, and heightened visibility. For instance, Ash described a lack of belonging as “being bullied, or being ignored, excluded.” Queer youth found heightened belonging with people, places, and situations they perceived to be emotionally safe (e.g., accepting, supportive), aligning with Lee and Robbins’ dimension of connectedness. Those stories underscored several values shared by queer youth including

open-mindedness, inclusion, and respecting difference. Queer college students were apt to evaluate belonging by affiliation based on shared political, ethical, and cultural alignment.

Family was a central site of belonging, especially for queer high school students who were more dependent their families for companionship (e.g., “it’s not like you can unfamily them”). Families promoted belonging when they talked openly about gender and sexuality, explicitly expressed acceptance of the queer community, and advocated for their queer youth (e.g., reminding others to use the youth’s chosen name and pronouns). Participants overwhelmingly identified mothers and queer siblings as their supportive family members. For instance, of the four participants who felt a sense of belonging with at least one parent, all four described their mothers as accepting compared to only two accepting fathers. This lack of belonging with certain family members, often attributed to their conservative and religious values, created doubt and instability in queer youth. The role of family weakened for queer colleges as they transitioned toward independence and reliance on peer relationships as primary sites of companionship and belonging.

School belonging differed between queer high school students, whose belonging was impacted by small grade cohorts and bullying, and first-year college students, who experienced increased freedom and exposure to new cultures. Queer high school students relied on LGBTQIA2S+ affinity spaces (i.e., GSAs) as sites of belonging and respites in their daily social interactions (e.g., “a space where nobody can come and bother us”). Several participants shared stories of school bullying, harassment, stigma, and internalized homophobia/transphobia which intensified in elementary and middle school and declined by late-high school and early college. The sample population is insufficient to generalize; however, queer CBCS students described more severe experiences of homophobic and transphobic bullying and inadequate institution

responses (e.g., “[teachers] never actually punished people”). Queer first-year college students were experimenting with gender and sexuality behind a mask of newcomer anonymity during the transition into campus life. Relying on symbolic and performative indicators (e.g., gender non-conformity, alternative aesthetics, mentioning pronouns, political discourse), queer college students relied on affinity for their sense of belonging. Overall, participants attributed experiences of homophobia and transphobia to an individual’s ignorance, conservatism, and close-mindedness pointing to diversity, equity, and inclusion as possible solutions.

Queer youth described the Gunnison Valley as more accepting, tolerant, (physically) safe, and progressive than other rural communities. The lack of overt violence and fear of physical harm in participants’ narratives differed from other studies on rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth (e.g., Marlin et al., 2023), as reflected in high average total GBS belongingness scores. These findings suggest a generally accepting community climate in Gunnison County, possibly due to Colorado’s progressive politics and local economic and cultural factors. However, a lack of LGBTQIA2S+ visibility and affirmation constrained youth belonging to specific spaces perceived to be emotionally safe, in what I call a culture of “quiet acceptance”. For instance, transgender youth often felt the heightened visibility of being out of place as one of few gender non-conforming people in the community. Community arts and online spaces expanded opportunities for belonging when mainstream and in-person sites were limited. These creative places included theater, music, Dungeons and Dragons, dance, and college radio and queer youth engaged with platforms like Discord, Tumblr, Archive of Our Own (AO3), TikTok, and YouTube online.

Lastly, socio-emotional skills (e.g., self-esteem, trust, growth mindset, empathy) promoted queer youth belonging by increasing resilience, healthy relationships, and emotional

regulation. These skills were demonstrated by how queer youth constructed their auto-narratives. For queer youth, self-expression and coming out were critical to building confidence, agency, and safety with oneself. When queer youth felt supported in their self-expression, through chosen name and pronouns, clothing, jewelry, hair styles, behavior, and areas of interest, they were more resilient to instances of judgement and stigma. Queer youth chose when and to whom they came out to depending on degree of anticipated support. In instances where they predicted a parent or relative would not accept their LGBTQIA2S+ identity, they instead chose not to come out as a protective strategy. Research consistently shows that coming out improves mental health outcomes for queer youth (Solomon et al., 2015); however, other studies highlight “selective disclosure” as a tool for mitigating the negative outcomes associated with coming out to an unaccepting person (Berger et al., 2022). Thus, respecting queer youth as agentic, teaching socio-emotional skills, and supporting coming out processes as unique and contextual can support belonging and mental resilience.

Limitations

This study took place in Gunnison County, a rural area in the state of Colorado which is more progressive than other areas of the United States. The sample population represented a small ($n = 7$) portion of the LGBTQIA2S+ youth population in the Valley. As such, the results of this study are not generalizable to other regions or representative of all queer youth in Gunnison County. The racial demographics of participants (85.7% white and non-Hispanic/Latinx) were homogenous yet comparable to county-wide demographics (85.4% white and non-Hispanic/Latinx; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). National demographic studies by the Williams Institute (2025) find that of 13 to 17 years old 9.5% identify as LGBT and 3.3% identify as transgender. This study overrepresents transgender youth (42.8% of participants were transgender), particularly transmasculine youth, a trend found in other studies (e.g., Pham et al., 2026). This may be due to differences in willingness to participate in research within the LGBTQIA2S+ community, recruitment techniques, or perceptions of safety to engage with me as an androgynous to transmasculine presenting person.

Sampling via local GSAs was effective for recruiting rural queer youth, a hard-to-reach population. Consequently, the sample population was biased toward queer youth who actively participate in their schools GSA and out as queer. This study did not represent the experiences of youth who are not involved in GSAs, not out as LGBTQIA2S+, and who are more isolated from queer resources in the Valley. The sample size was limited to seven participants due to limited time and resources. Further, sampling was complicated early on by a surge of spam responses following an online recruitment post to the Gunnison Valley Pride Instagram account. During this time, several video call interviews were conducted with fraudulent individuals who claimed to live in Gunnison County, but whose answers were suspicious (e.g., naming towns not in the

county, inaccurate descriptions of the community). This required a pivot to in-person interviews, unless a participant was obviously from the area (i.e., use of a GWSD or Western email account, to ensure the study's integrity).

Interviewees chose between in-person and video call modalities to increase accessibility for participants with disabilities, busy schedules, or safety concerns. This is an appropriate and recommended approach to research with queer and rural youth (Nye et al., 2025); however, it was more difficult to notice nonverbal communication during video interviews. While open-ended questions allowed participants to guide the interviews, the absence of targeted follow-up questions constrained analytic depth in some areas. In retrospect, I would have asked more questions about politics, socioeconomic factors, household composition, religion, and disability for a deeper exploration of participant's developmental backgrounds and intersecting identities. Socioemotional skills emerged as a theme at the end of data collection, and it would have been useful to ask participants about their coping skills (e.g., where were these skills learned, did school SEL curricula contribute to their skillset, etc.) and mental health histories. During interviews, I disclosed my status as queer and non-binary, which was often assumed by participants which appeared to increase participant comfort but may have biased participant responses.

The demographic questions on the survey (see Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire), administered at the end of interviews, did not ask about several salient factors – political identity, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, disability status (i.e., physical and mental health history), or citizenship status – which I would include in future studies. Lastly, the General Belongingness Scale (GBS), intended to measure participants' general sense of belonging, may not have been the most appropriate instrument for this study. The GBS does not

differentiate between contexts of belonging such as family, school, or community, limiting its interpretive specificity. Additionally, I was only able to find one study that applied the GBS to rural populations and it did not report mean total GBS scores (Campbell-Halfaker, 2023). With no similar studies to compare total GBS score to, the GBS in this study is merely descriptive.

Recommendations for Future Programming and Research

The findings from this study support several evidence-based pathways toward strengthening queer youth belonging and, in turn, social and mental health in Gunnison County. First, schools are critical institutional sites for intervention. Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) are consistently associated with improvements to queer youths' educational attainment, psychological well-being, substance use, and resilience (Toomey et al., 2011). This study, although biased toward queer youth already participating in GSAs, found GSAs to be important sites of belonging, especially for queer high school students. Thus, it recommended to continue investing in local GSAs, including Safe Space, SAGA, and Western Queer Collective. School staff can provide warm handoffs and mentorship programs between high school GSA students and their future college's GSA to help prevent drop off in GSA participation in the transition from high school to college. In addition, such handoffs would be useful from middle to high school if a system for this is not already in place. Further, schools must consider ways to increase GSA participation for students who are questioning, allies, and not yet out to normalize LGBTQIA2S+ identities and support exploration of gender and sexual orientation identities. Moreover, explicit anti-bullying policies that enumerate sexual orientation and gender identifies, when paired with meaningful enforcement, are linked to lower rates of bullying and suicide attempts among queer youth (Hall, 2017). School can affirm gender and sexual diversity and foster inclusion when teachers adopt a queer pedagogy (Quinlivan & Town, 2010) and when classrooms adopt socio-emotional learning curriculum at early ages (Amadori et al., 2025).

Research shows that queer youth who feel supported by their family, a primary site of belonging, experience improved mental well-being (e.g., less depression, anxiety, suicidality), particularly for bisexual and non-binary youth (Ancín-Nicolás et al., 2024). Interventions are

needed that support parents, guardians, siblings, and extended family members to support their young queer relatives. In this study, siblings emerged as allies for belonging, especially queer-identified siblings, which aligns with other studies that link sibling acceptance to improved mental health and identity affirmation (Klepper et al., 2024). Evidence-based approaches, such as the Family Support Model developed by San Francisco State University's Family Acceptance Project which provides resources to families with LGBTQIA2S+ youth, offer promising paths toward improving family belonging (Family Acceptance Project, n.d.). Community programs like parents of LGBTQIA2S+ youth education workshops, queer-informed family counseling services, and support groups encourage families of LGBTQIA2S+ youth to support one another. Lastly, I urge readers with LGBTQIA2S+ youth in their life to connect with their queer youth by asking questions about their gender and sexuality – “Is there a character (from a show, game, movie) whose gender feels like you?”, “Do you know what LGBTQIA2S+ stands for?”, or “Have you heard other students at school bully or talk down to LGBTQIA2S+ people? Let’s talk about it.” – and learn about LGBTQIA2S+ history together (see Michael Bronskis’s 2019 book *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*).

Lastly, interventions at the community and structural level focus on moving culture toward LGBTQIA2S+ acceptance and supporting policy and legislation that ensures the rights of queer youth. The political agenda in America has increasingly targeted LGBTQIA2S+ youth, particularly transgender and gender non-conforming youth and youth without U.S. citizenship. As of April 24, 2026, the ACLU tracked 526 anti-LGBTQ bills in the United States including proposed censorship, healthcare restrictions, sports bans for transgender athletes, drag bans, and “forced outing in schools” (ACLU, 2026). Of these, three bills were introduced in Colorado – HB26-1087 (Safeguard Minors from Sex-Altering Interventions), HB26-1128 (Limitation on

Gender Transition Procedure Claims), and HB26-1083 (Protect Female Sports Act) – all of which are in the status of “advancing”, meaning neither defeated nor passed (ACLU, 2026). Studies consistently find this “judicial trauma” significantly impact the mental and physical health of queer youth (Woods, 2026). The local community can intervene through advocacy and activism to protect LGBTQIA2S+ rights, ensuring that local policies are inclusive and protective for LGBTQIA2S+ youth, and enact a culture of inclusion and acceptance. Moreover, local agencies must train providers to provide gender-affirming and LGBTQIA2S+ affirming care and services, particularly in healthcare and social services. Lastly, community events that increase LGBTQIA2S+ visibility and celebrate the queer community, such as Gunnison Valley Pride, provide an opportunity for cultural change.

Future research should prioritize rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth while addressing persistent gaps in intersectional representation, particularly for youth of color, immigrant, and Indigenous youth (Kemmerer et al., 2025). Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how belonging evolves across developmental stages and to identify points of intervention. Participatory and arts-based approaches, such as photovoice, are especially well-suited to capturing the affective and relational dimensions of belonging while fostering agency, self-expression, and peer connection among queer and trans youth (Cosgrove et al., 2023). Comparative analysis across rural and urban contexts may further clarify how rurality shapes belonging through differences in community climate and access to resources. Finally, incorporating perspectives from families, educators, and peers alongside youth narratives may better conceptualize belonging as a relational, community-level process rather than an individual experience.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of queer-identified adolescents and emerging adults in rural Gunnison County, Colorado. This study included a small sample size, and findings are not generalizable to the entire queer youth population in the Valley or to queer youth populations in other regions. However, the report offers a glimpse into the lives of queer youth and how they construct belonging. Queer youth understand belonging as rooted in safety, authenticity, and affiliation. Overall, queer youth found belonging in close relationships and spaces where they felt safe to be their authentic self, which often meant relying on social indicators of LGBTQIA2S+ acceptance. Across narratives, safe and affirming environments, supportive adults, and engagement in online, creative, and affinity-based communities played critical roles in fostering belonging.

Queer youth found Gunnison County to be accepting and welcoming to the queer population when compared to their expectations of rural communities as hostile. However, queer youth noted a lack of other visibly queer individuals and a culture that fails to affirm and consider their queer identities. This culture of “quiet acceptance”, whereby the community tolerates queer youth but fails to fully incorporate them in the broader culture, constrained queer youth belonging to specific spaces that youth perceived to be safe. For instance, belonging was typically found where queer youth found companionship (e.g., accepting interpersonal relationships), affiliation (e.g., GSAs), and connectedness as their authentic selves (e.g., creative, arts, interest-based, and online spaces). Moreover, queer youth expressed desires for Gunnison County to offer queer-accepting third spaces (e.g., gay bars), racial and cultural diversity, and a culture of acceptance toward difference.

This study provided insights into the developmental transition from high school to college for queer-identified youth. In high school, queer youth belonging was impacted by school bullying, family acceptance, and socio-emotional skills for coping and resilience. During the transition to college, queer students were more apt to evaluate belonging based on shared political, ethical, and cultural alignment as their primary sites of belonging shifted from family toward peers. During this transition, queer college students experimented with self-expression, adjusted to newfound freedom, and experienced exposure to new cultures and norms. These findings indicate a need to bolster and enforce anti-bullying policies in K-12 schooling and to support queer college students in their transition, particularly by offering education and resources for questioning and closeted students.

As the first study to focus on queer youth populations in Gunnison County, this research addresses a local gap in knowledge and provides insights for community educators, organizations, and households to support the mental health of queer youth. The findings complicate stereotypes of rural contexts as monolithically hostile to queer youth populations and reveals a landscape of covert discrimination and “quiet acceptance”. This study contributes to a strengths-based view of queer youth as agentic, resilient experts in constructing their sense of belonging. This affirms Marie Laing’s assertion that QT2S Native youth are “already creating the changes in the world that their communities require” (Laing, 2021, p. 56). Supporting youth belonging is not only a matter of promoting the well-being of queer individuals but is a pathway toward creating well-being and inclusion for the broader community.

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Appendix A: List of Figures**Table 1***Participant profiles (n=7)*

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Trans ?	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Grade	School	Time in Gunnison County
Ronan	14	Male	Trans	Asexual; pansexual	Non-Hispanic white	9th	GHS	10+ years
Paloma	18	Female	Cis	Bisexual	Hispanic white	Undergrad.	Western	<1 year
Shredded Cheese (S.C.)	14	Female	Cis	Bisexual	Non-Hispanic white	9th	GHS	1-4 years
Ash	17	Non-binary	Trans	Asexual	Non-Hispanic white	10th	CBCS	10+ years
Leo	17	Male	Trans	Asexual; gay; queer	Non-Hispanic white	12th	CBCS	5-9 years
Riley	18	Female; “Eldritch horror”	Cis	Bisexual; queer	Non-Hispanic white	Undergrad.	Western	<1 year
Jay	18	Not sure; male	Not sure	Queer	Non-Hispanic white	Undergrad.	Western	<1 year

Note. *Trans reflects participants’ self-identification at the time of interview. Sex assigned at birth was not collected. GHS = Gunnison High School; CBCS = Crested Butte Secondary School; Western = Western Colorado University.

Table 2*Participant Demographics (n = 7)*

Category	Characteristic	Total Count
Grade	9th	2
	10th	1
	11th	0
	12th	1
	First-year undergraduate	3
Race/Ethnicity	White, not Hispanic/Latino	6
	White, Hispanic/Latino	1
Gender Identity	Female	3
	Male	3
	Non-Binary	1
	"Eldritch horror"	1
	Not Sure	1
Transgender?	Cisgender	3
	Transgender	3
	Not Sure	1
Sexual Orientation	Asexual	3
	Bisexual	3
	Queer	3
	Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual	1
	Pansexual	1
Amount of Time	<1 year	3
Living in Gunnison County	1-4 years	1
	5-9 years	1
	>10 years	2

Note. Multiple responses and fill-in responses were allowed for gender identity and sexual orientation

Table 3*General Belongingness Scale (GBS) responses*

Question	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Q1. When I am with other people, I feel included	5.29	1.25	3	6
Q2. I have close bonds with family and friends	5.86	1.77	2	7
Q3*. I feel like an outsider	4.00	1.73	1	6
Q4*. I feel as if people do not care about me	4.00	2.00	2	7
Q5. I feel accepted by others	5.00	1.53	2	6
Q6*. Because I do not belong, I feel distant during the holiday season	5.57	1.81	3	7
Q7*. I feel isolated from the rest of the world	4.86	2.27	1	7
Q8. I have a sense of belonging	5.14	1.77	2	7
Q9*. When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger	4.29	1.11	3	6
Q10. I have a place at the table with others	5.57	1.40	3	7
Q11. I feel connected with others	5.29	1.50	2	6
Q12*. Friends and family do not involve me in their plans	4.71	1.98	2	7
Total belongingness score	59.57	16.44	26	74

Note. *Negatively worded questions were reverse coded. All scores follow a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree (less belonging) to 7=Strongly Agree (more belonging).

Table 4*Total GBS scores*

Participant	Total GBS Score	# Sds from avg	Level of Belonging
Ronan	56	-0.22	High belonging
Paloma	70	0.63	Very high belonging
Shredded Cheese (S.C.)	74	0.88	Very high belonging
Ash	67	0.45	High belonging
Leo	26	-2.04	Very low belonging
Riley	55	-0.28	High belonging
Jay	69	0.57	Very high belonging

Note. Total GBS scores were evaluated based on the score range (74 points) as follows: Very low belonging (12 to 26), low belonging (27 to 40), moderate belonging (41 to 54), high belonging (55 to 68), and very high belonging (69 to 84).

Table 5*LGBTQIA2S+ acceptance among participant's parents/guardians*

Participant	Mother	Father
Ronan	Accepting	Unaccepting
Paloma	n/a	n/a
Shredded Cheese (S.C.)	Accepting	Unaccepting
Ash	Accepting	Accepting
Leo	Unaccepting	Unaccepting
Riley	Accepting	Accepting
Jay	Unaccepting	n/a

Note. n/a describes participants who did not mention that parent or are not out as LGBTQIA2S+

Appendix B: List of Acronyms

CBCS	Crested Butte Community School, which includes Crested Butte Elementary School and Crested Butte Secondary School
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
GCSAPP	Gunnison County Substance Abuse Prevention Project
GHS	Gunnison High School
GMS	Gunnison Middle School
GSA	Gender and Sexuality Alliance or Gay-Straight Alliance
GWSD	Gunnison Watershed School District
HKCS	Healthy Kids Colorado Survey
LGBTQIA2S+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, Two Spirit, etc.
Safe Space	Safe Space (GSA club) at Gunnison High School
SAGA	Sexuality and Gender Alliance (GSA club) at Crested Butte Community School
SEL	Socio-emotional learning
Western	Western Colorado University

Appendix C: General Belongingness Scale (GBS)

Please fill out the questions to the best of your ability. If you have any questions or need clarification, you can ask the researcher.

1 = strongly disagree

2 = disagree

3 = slightly disagree

4 = neither agree nor disagree

5 = slightly agree

6 = agree

7 = strongly agree

1. When I am with other people, I feel included.
2. I have close bonds with family and friends.
3. I feel like an outsider.
4. I feel as if people do not care about me.
5. I feel accepted by others.
6. Because I do not belong, I feel distant during the holiday season.
7. I feel isolated from the rest of the world.
8. I have a sense of belonging.
9. When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger.
10. I have a place at the table with others.
11. I feel connected with others.
12. Friends and family do not involve me in their plans.

Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Please fill out the questions to the best of your ability. If you have any questions or need clarification, you can ask the researcher.

1. How did you find out about this research study?

- a. Flyer
- b. Word of mouth (ex. Family, friend, teacher)
- c. School club
- d. Social media
- e. Other – fill in

2. What year were you born?

3. This study is confidential, meaning your name will not be shared with anyone else.

Researchers will sometimes use pseudonyms, or fake names, to talk about participants in a research study. We want to use a name that would align with how you see yourself.

Please type any names or descriptions of names you would like us to use. Make sure this is a name no one could use to identify you. (ex. "a masculine name, "a Hispanic name")

4. What town do you currently live in?

- a. Gunnison
- b. Crested Butte
- c. Marble
- d. Pitkin
- e. Somerset
- f. Other – fill in

5. What school do you currently attend?

- a. Gunnison High School
 - b. Crested Butte Secondary School
 - c. Western Colorado University
 - d. Marble Charter School
 - e. Other – fill in
6. What grade are you in?
- a. 9th grade
 - b. 10th grade
 - c. 11th grade
 - d. 12th grade
 - e. Undergraduate student
 - f. Other – fill in
7. Which do you identify as? (check all that apply)
- a. Asexual
 - b. Bisexual
 - c. Gay, lesbian, or homosexual
 - d. Pansexual
 - e. Queer
 - f. Straight or heterosexual
 - g. I'm not sure
 - h. Other – fill in
8. How do you describe yourself? (check all that apply)
- a. Female

- b. Gender fluid
 - c. Gender queer
 - d. Non-binary
 - e. Male
 - f. I'm not sure
 - g. Other – fill in
9. Do you identify as transgender (meaning your gender is different from the sex you were assigned at birth)?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I'm not sure
10. How would you describe yourself?
- a. Hispanic or Latino
 - b. Non-Hispanic or Non-Latino
11. Which of the following best describes you? (Select all that apply)
- a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Middle Eastern
 - e. Multiracial
 - f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - g. White or Caucasian
 - h. Other – fill in