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Between Headlines and Hallways: The Cost of Ideological Policy on 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the impacts of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in mainstream media on 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Using the Minority Stress Framework and a case study format, qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 youth. While participants described the impact of media-driven stigma and negativity, many directly referenced Saskatchewan's "pronoun policy," viewing it as an institutional reinforcement of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiment. The policy made discrimination feel targeted, immediate, and personal for these participants. Discussions of social exclusion, safety concerns, and institutionalized discrimination reflect the harmful influence of restrictive governance policies. These findings build on existing research on the compounding impacts of minority stress and institutional stigma in education and underscore the need for responsible and inclusive education policy and governance.

Résumé

Cette étude avait pour objectif d'examiner les répercussions sur les jeunes 2ELGBTQQIA+ de sentiments à leur encontre véhiculés par les médias grand public. À l'aide du Cadre du stress minoritaire et d'une approche par étude de cas, des entretiens qualitatifs ont été menés auprès de quinze jeunes. Si les participants ont décrit l'impact de la stigmatisation et de la négativité véhiculées par les médias, beaucoup ont directement fait référence à la « politique sur les pronoms » de la Saskatchewan, la considérant comme un renforcement institutionnel de sentiments anti-2ELGBTQQIA+. Cette politique a

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donné à ces participants le sentiment de subir une discrimination ciblée, immédiate et personnelle. Pour ceux-ci, les politiques de gouvernance restrictives comme celle de la Saskatchewan sont à l'origine de réflexions sur l'exclusion sociale, la sécurité personnelle et la discrimination institutionnalisée. Les résultats de cette étude s'appuient sur les recherches existantes concernant les effets du stress des minorités et de la stigmatisation institutionnelle en éducation, et soulignent le besoin de mettre en place des politiques et une gouvernance éducatives qui soient responsables et inclusives.

Keywords / Mots clés : anti-2SLGBTQIA+ youth, x Saskatchewan, social exclusion, inclusive education, pronoun policy / anti-2ELGBTQQIA+, x Saskatchewan, exclusion sociale, éducation inclusive, politique sur les pronoms

Introduction

In August 2023, the Saskatchewan government introduced a policy requiring parental consent for students under 16 who wish to change their names or pronouns used at school. This policy consisted of amendments to the provincial education act (*The Education Act, 1995*), as well as associated mandates (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). Commonly referred to as the "Saskatchewan pronoun policy" or "the pronoun policy," it was framed as a policy to support parental rights, and sparked national debate over student safety, identity, and the role of such policies in schools. While public debate has largely focused on the tension between parental authority, children's rights, and the notwithstanding clause (*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982*, s. 33; Simes, 2023), little to no attention has been focused on the voices of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth themselves who are directly affected.

While this study initially set out to examine how anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in mainstream media impact the mental health of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, it uncovered a deeper thread: *while most participants described their feelings surrounding social and broadcast media, several participants explicitly linked their distress to the pronoun policy*. Shared was that the policy transformed discrimination from a distant media narrative into an immediate, deeply personal reality existing in the institutions meant to protect them. Even for those who did not mention the policy directly, their reflections on social exclusion, safety concerns, and institutional stigma revealed how media discourse and restrictive governance policies are experienced as interconnected in shaping identity and belonging.

By centring student perspectives, the findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on systemic stigma and the broader identity politics that influence 2SLGBTQIA+ youth well-being, and highlight how exclusionary rhetoric, public debate, and restrictive school policies compound to create environments that undermine student safety and self-worth. This study calls for responsible education policies that actively acknowledge and address these harms rather than reinforce them.

Background literature

Legal and institutional accountability for schools

Educational institutions are legally mandated to provide for the well-being of all students.

While this may seem like a moral imperative, it is also a legal and policy-based obligation. It is clearly stated in Saskatchewan's *Education Act, 1995* and further emphasized in the Saskatchewan *Provincial Education Plan 2030*, which identifies safe and inclusive schools as a core priority area (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). This is a basic tenet of education, long understood in learning theory. Maslow's hierarchy of needs outlines that safety and a sense of belonging are foundational prerequisites for learning, necessary for students to fully engage in academic development (Maslow, 1943).

The *Saskatchewan Human Rights Code, 2018* explicitly protects individuals from discrimination based on gender identity and expression. This issue is particularly relevant in school settings, where education policy must ensure a balance between freedom of speech, religious freedoms, and the fundamental rights and safety of all students (Buhr, 2023; Fields & Wotipka, 2022; Peter, Campbell, & Taylor, 2021).

Although legal protections exist, homophobic comments remain common in schools and are noticed by all students, not just those who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+ (Kosciw, Clark, & Menard, 2022; Peter et al., 2021; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Educators often fail to intervene, even though they are responsible for student safety (Denison, Faulkner, O'Brien, Jeanes, & Canning, 2023; Fantus & Newman, 2021; Olson, 2018; Poteat, Slaatten, & Breivik, 2019), which reinforces harmful behaviours and increases risks for queer and trans youth (Ioverno, Nappa, Russell, & Baiocco, 2022; Russell, Bishop, Saba, James, & Ioverno, 2021).

Conversely, research has shown that addressing homophobic commentary in schools fosters positive perceptions of 2SLGBTQIA+ issues (Denison et al., 2023; Fields & Wotipka, 2022), as do anti-discrimination policies, inclusive curricula, and gender-neutral facilities when they are embedded into a school's mission and daily operations (Fields & Wotipka, 2022; Russell et al., 2021). Schools need policy frameworks that combat discrimination and bullying while fostering inclusive school environments (Fantus & Newman, 2021; McBrien, Rutigliano, & Sticca, 2022).

The intersection of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiment in media and policy

While not exhaustive, research shows that sex and gender exist on a spectrum (Fausto-Sterling, 2008) and that sexual orientation and gender identity have biological foundations (LeVay, 1994). Studies on same-sex behaviour across species challenge heteronormative thinking, as does research emphasizing the role of culture over biology in shaping gendered behaviour (Bagemihl, 1999; Fine, 2010). These perspectives challenge binary thinking and underscore the need for this knowledge to shape attitudes and policy (Ramos, Burgess, & Ollen, 2022). Despite this increasing body of work, a lack of inclusive school policies persists (McBrien et al., 2022), and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric has become increasingly visible (Ramos et al., 2022). In Canada, the concept of parental rights is increasingly being used to oppose children's rights, yet it has no constitutional basis (Loewen Walker & Adesanya, 2024). Anti-2SLGBTQIA+ organizers weaponize the idea of parental rights in order to censor discussions on gender and sexuality in schools (Buhr, 2023). This weaponization frames 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion as a controversial issue, which not only reflects societal tensions but also reinforces exclusionary frameworks, affecting both public policy and institutional decision-making (Buhr, 2023; Loewen Walker & Adesanya, 2024).

Recent events across Canada illustrate this increasing resistance to 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. Businesses supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ rights have faced harassment and economic consequences (Zandbergen, 2023). Public demonstrations against gender-affirming healthcare have escalated, with outright rejection, organized protests, and violence (Moran, 2023). Political and religious groups have increasingly challenged 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in public spaces, pushing for bans on Pride displays and legal challenges to human rights protections.

The influence of media and public discourse on education policy

As public hostility toward 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals increases, educational institutions have become central sites of policy contestation, where ideological debates over gender identity, sexuality, and parental rights play out (Kahne, Rogers, & Kwako, 2025; Lewson, 2024; Pei-Middleton, 2023; Ramos et al., 2022). In Canada, school board meetings, once routine governance forums, have become ideological battlegrounds, with opposition groups actively lobbying for restrictive education policies (Buhr, 2023).

Given Canada's legal commitments to gender equality through frameworks such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982*, schools in all provinces should be at the forefront of ensuring these rights are upheld through explicit policies that protect 2SLGBTQIA+ students, yet policies are shifting in the opposite direction. For example, New Brunswick's Policy 713, though later rescinded following a change in government, had removed protections for transgender students by requiring parental consent for name and pronoun changes (Stechyson, 2023; WLEAF, 2024). Alberta implemented policy to restrict gender identity and extended it beyond schools, limiting trans students' participation in sports and reinforcing ideological barriers to inclusion (Kerr, 2024; Simes, 2023).

Saskatchewan's pronoun policy mirrors this approach. This prairie province in Western Canada has a population of just over 1.1 million. Despite its vast geographical spread and a balance of smaller cities, towns, and farms, the province is relatively split in terms of urban and rural population, political ideology, and attitudes toward diversity and inclusion. While this is not a study about policy diffusion, which typically examines how policies are transferred between governments (Shipan & Volden, 2008), restrictive gender identity policies in New Brunswick, Alberta, and Saskatchewan illustrate how restrictive policies in one jurisdiction can ripple outward, influencing perceptions and behaviours in other regions (Béland, 2010; Fields & Wotipka, 2022; Philbin, Wurtz, McCrimmon, Kelly, Homan, & Guta, 2023).

Despite the policy's direct impact on students, educators, and school communities, the government conducted minimal consultation before enacting the parents' bill of rights (Quon, 2023). The policy restricts students under the age of 16 from self-identifying in schools without parental consent (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023), which sparked significant resistance (Loewen Walker & Adesanya, 2024). When faced with legal challenges and an injunction to halt the policy (Simes, 2023; Loewen Walker & Adesanya, 2024), the government invoked the notwithstanding clause, as outlined in section 33 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982*. This provision allows governments to override certain Charter rights for renewable

five-year periods, after which time, the legislation must be re-enacted to maintain protection. The use of section 33 shields the policy from judicial review and signals a willingness to proceed despite Charter-based concerns (Centre for Constitutional Studies, 2019). As such, the policy remains in effect.

The impact of school climate on 2SLGBTQIA+ student well-being

Positive school climate and related policies are essential in the development of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth (Fields & Wotipka, 2022; Russell et al., 2021). Conversely, a growing body of research demonstrates the negative impact of restrictive school policies on 2SLGBTQIA+ youth mental health. Egale Canada's 2021 study found that 62 percent of 2SLGBTQIA+ students feel unsafe in school, compared with just 11 percent of their heterosexual peers (Peter et al., 2021), illustrating the hostile school climate that many queer and trans youth navigate daily, exacerbated by policies that signal a lack of institutional support (Fantus & Newman, 2021; McBrien et al., 2022). Such structural stigma in education normalizes behaviours (Pei-Middleton, 2023; Russell et al., 2021) and creates a cumulative effect, where students experience increased social isolation as schools fail to affirm their identities. This results in higher mental health risks, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Grassing, 2021; Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, Lattanner, McKetta, & Pachankis, 2024; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2022; Pei-Middleton, 2023; van der Star, Pachankis, & Bränström, 2021; Wells, 2015); as well as internalized stigma, where youth suppress or deny their identities in response to discriminatory environments (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2024; Schwab, Peter, Lawson, & Jessani, 2022). The effects of these policies are further compounded for students who experience intersecting forms of marginalization, such as racialized, disabled, or socioeconomically disadvantaged 2SLGBTQIA+ youth (Morgan, Cunningham, Dyrud, Elliott, Ige et al., 2024).

Theoretical and methodological framework

Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Framework (MSF) and Structural Stigma Theory (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014) provide the conceptual foundation for understanding the heightened mental health risks faced by sexual and gender minorities. The MSF outlines how chronic exposure to distal stressors such as stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion contribute to proximal stressors such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017; Goldbach, Rhoades, Mamey, Senese, Karys, & Marsiglia, 2021). Structural Stigma Theory provides a lens to examine how these stressors are produced and sustained at the societal level. This includes laws, policies, and institutional practices which shape identity, self-perception, academic engagement, and long-term well-being (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014).

The MSF also served as a methodological and analytical framework, guiding the research design and data analysis. It influenced the development of interview questions, which focused on participants' encounters with anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in the media and how these act as distal and proximal stressors. The data analysis was guided by MSF principles to identify patterns of minority stress, coping strategies, and their impact on mental health. Structural Stigma Theory informed

the interpretation of these findings by situating these participants' experiences within broader societal conditions, including laws, policies, and institutional practices that produce and sustain these stressors at a systemic level. This approach facilitated an understanding of the intersection between marginalized stress, resilience, and overall well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.

Participants

Using purposive snowball sampling, 15 2SLGBTQIA+ youth (ages 16–19) from Saskatchewan were recruited through Instagram, with a post that included a QR code directing interested individuals to an online platform. In total, 23 individuals expressed interest and completed initial intake questions, which included age and self-identified gender and sexual identity to determine eligibility and support sample variation. From this pool, 15 participants were selected using a maximal variation sampling approach, with attention to diversity in age and identity. Participants represented a range of gender identities and sexual orientations, including transgender, non-binary, bisexual, queer, intersex, and Two-Spirit identities. Several participants identified with more than one identity. The target sample size of 15 was established during the ethics application process and was determined to be appropriate given the anticipated depth of qualitative data. Recruitment concluded once this sample size was reached and sufficient variation across participants' identities and experiences had been achieved.

Given the age of participants, consent was sought prior to the interviews via a consent form, and was supplemented with verbal questions to ensure potential participants fully understood the parameters of the study, their right to stop or withdraw at any time, and how their data would be used. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes. For their time, participants were given an honorarium of CAD$100.

Data collection and coding

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio-recorded. Measures were taken to ensure privacy for both the participant and interviewer. Questions focused on both proximal and distal stressors and their impacts, as well as coping mechanisms and supports. Initial questions about life experiences (using a chronological recall approach) were asked, followed by open-ended questions about the participants' perceptions of reports found in media. Although policy was not explicitly addressed in the interview questions, participants frequently described experiences related to school rules and practices, which were interpreted as policy-level phenomena in the analysis. To minimize bias, interviewers refrained from referencing specific media reports, ensuring that only those spontaneously recalled by participants were discussed.

Existing research on 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, media representation, and mental health informed the development of questions. Prior literature has emphasized the importance of understanding how individuals encounter stigma (distal stressors), interpret these experiences, and internalize or respond to them (proximal stressors) (Meyer, 2003; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Goldbach et al., 2021). In alignment with this, the interview questions were designed to capture participants' exposure to stigma

through media ("Can you recall a specific instance where you encountered anti-2SLGBTQI+ sentiments in mainstream media?"), their interpretations and emotional responses ("How did you feel after encountering it?"; "How do these negative portrayals impact your confidence or willingness to openly express your identity?"), and their coping strategies and supports ("How do you cope with or respond to these negative portrayals?"; "Have you sought mental health supports as a direct or indirect result …?"). The interview questions were subsequently piloted to ensure clarity and flow, and to test whether they effectively captured participants' experiences with media, identity, and related impacts in their everyday lives.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data were systematically analyzed in three phases, following Saldana's (2009) coding methods. First, they were condensed using initial codes based on patterns and phrases in the transcripts, then organized into themes and subsequently mapped to the theoretical framework. Consistency in data collection was supported by having a single researcher conduct all interviews using the same semi-structured protocol, allowing for a uniform approach while maintaining flexibility for participant-led responses. Coding consistency and interpretive alignment were supported through discussion among researchers. Where differences in interpretation arose, these were discussed among the research team. In these discussions, particular attention was given to the perspective of the team member with relevant lived experience to support accurate and respectful interpretation of participant narratives.

Transcript review by participants (member checking) was not conducted due to ethical considerations related to the potential for re-traumatization, as advised by the research ethics board. Instead, trustworthiness was supported through careful interview question development, reflexive analysis, and collaborative coding among researchers. Given the sensitivity of the topic, care was taken throughout data collection and analysis to remain attentive to participants' perspectives and meanings.

Data presentation

This section presents the qualitative findings derived from the interviews. Participants' narratives were clustered into five overarching themes that trace their thoughts, including identity exploration, encounters with harmful media messaging, experiences with institutional stigma, coping strategies, and future outlook. While the interview questions were structured around identity, media experiences, and coping, the themes were developed inductively through analysis. Several themes aligned with these areas; however, others, particularly institutionalized marginalization, emerged from participants' narratives beyond the scope of the interview prompts. Note that pseudonyms were assigned by the research team to protect participant confidentiality. A consistent internal system was used to link pseudonyms to participant data during analysis while ensuring that all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reporting.

Living contexts for identity exploration

Participants described how recognizing and embracing their 2SLGBTQIA+ identity was often fraught with uncertainty, especially if they were living in families or communities where negativity is anticipated:

> I haven't told any of my extended family, just because I'm terrified of that. (Emery)
>
> I always kind of knew that I was a little … different than the people around me because I didn't really grow up in a super-duper accepting household. … It was either you were gay, or you were straight. Hey, you're either a boy or you're a girl, and I'm neither. (Everest)
>
> My parents are very right-wing, and my experience with that is them talking about other people with aligning with that. And it's very, very violent and very … not safe. [My dad] will … come up and talk to me and say if your school is indoctrinating you in this or if you are part of this then I will, I will not be happy with you … and it's, it's one of the worst feelings that you can have. (Phoenix)

Some participants came out to some family members, but not to others:

> My family was pretty good. I have a gay uncle and then I have a sister who's also queer. So they've already kind of been exposed to that … [but]I haven't told any of my extended family, just because I'm terrified of that. (Quinn)
>
> One of my parents is homophobic and anti-LGBT. So I never really talked about it. But the rest of my family, my immediate family, is very supportive. (Reese)
>
> My sister took it well, including my mom, I told some online friends … some of them are queer as well. But I've yet to tell my Dad and my grandparents and stuff. (Tatum)

Some participants described religious contexts or small-town constraints as the underlying reasons for being cautious about their own self-expression or for hiding their identities completely:

> Sometimes people of different religion … they say this is bad, and I'm like stop saying that because my household also has religious stuff in it. But I still want to be myself and I understand how that can be for people who are queer … (Reese)
>
> I live in a small town with a small school, and everybody's parents know everybody. And so if it gets to one person who doesn't agree, then it'll get to somebody in my own school, like we'll have bigots or whatever … then to their parents … then back to my parents. And if that happens, then I'm f**ed … (Phoenix)
>
> When I was preparing my speech for the baptism, I mentioned to my pastor that I was bisexual, and he told me that I should keep that to myself, and that the church would not accept me … if I told them that. And so, he moved on and so. I kind of just spent the rest of my time at that church feeling like I was hiding a part of me. (Oakley)

Despite the risks of coming out, especially in religious, small-town, or anti-queer environments, not every disclosure led to rejection. Some youth were selective with

who they told, while others took a chance and were met with unexpectedly supportive responses:

> My family was pretty accepting. My mom was just like, "yeah, you know, I'll love you no matter what." My dad was just like, "OK, I guess," you know, he's not a very confrontational man, so he just kind of goes with whatever. And he was … he's OK with it. (Rowan)

> They have been the most supportive, especially my family, with going through all of this stuff. They have been my number one allies, and they've been helping me through bullies and hardships that I have gone through. And I would just want to say out there that without family I would probably not be here right now and how strong I am right now. (Quinn)

> When I first told them I was thinking about transitioning, they were supportive, they weren't mean or anything. It just got very emotional, especially for my mom because she just felt like she was losing her little kid. My friends and my family are very supportive of me in any shape or form, no matter the pronouns, no matter the name change, anything like that … so that is a blessing. And I know a lot of people don't always have that like I do. (Sloan)

For others, coming out was met with care and openness. Even if those around them didn't fully understand, their responses provided a foundation of support:

> It took me a couple of years to tell my mom about it. My mom is super supportive. [Even though] she doesn't 100% understand gender fluid individuals and stuff like that. (Indigo)

> And then one day we were all just hanging on the couch, and I walked in and I said, "I like girls." And my dad looked up at me and said "What? Sounds like I like girls," and he added, "OK." And I kind of paused and I thought, that's not what you're supposed to say, you're supposed to say, "You're not allowed to do that." He added, "What do you need?" And then he made me explain what that meant in my terms. And it was kind of nice. And then I told them that I didn't think they would be supportive, and he said, "Why wouldn't I be supportive? You're my kid." (Oakley)

A small number of participants felt safe enough in their family environments to come out without fear. In these homes, queerness was either embraced or already normalized:

> Not sure how much you know about my mom or dad, but yeah. But they're both queer. (River)

> My mom's pretty open to me. She's always been open to talk or friendly. She grew up with a mom that wasn't very helpful, very rude too, sometimes. So she never wanted that to be that kind of mom … so I feel like I'm not searching for who I am, I got to feel comfortable with the way I'm already. (Ellison)

These accounts of experiences underscore how parental and community acceptance shaped or constrained these youths' identity, belonging, and emotional well-being.

Encountering negativity in media and policy

Conversations about 2SLGBTQIA+ messages in mainstream media were robust with all participants, albeit for different reasons. Participants consistently highlighted frustration with exaggerated, inaccurate, or reductive portrayals of 2SLGBTQIA+ people in digital and mainstream media:

> Personally, I think it's just a little bit over exaggerated in a way . . . I feel like whenever I see … the stereotypical queer in media I feel like there is just this representation, and not everybody's like that. And I think it just pushes that narrative onto people. (Milan)

> They create really impactful stereotypes when it comes to how we're perceived as a community and it can become extremely negative, like being on TikTok and being on the news and seeing anti-LGBTQ+ protests where they're actively degrading and demonizing it as a sexuality and making it seem like it's not a good thing … I feel like they make it negative in lots of different types of ways that there doesn't need to be. (Drew)

> It makes me feel a little bit less confident in myself most of the time, because most of the queer portrayals that we see in media are very stereotypical … but our queerness is just a small piece of who we are, but to people outside of the queer community, our queerness defines who we are. (Emery)

Mainstream and social media were described as platforms that frequently circulated anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric, misinformation, and fearmongering, often driven by political or ideological agendas. These messages not only affect the individual but also shape the beliefs of those around them:

> It was on TikTok, and they were making fun of the community saying, "oh, gay people are like this" and then they would show a really unflattering moment in the community's history … or of some queer person. And that this is what all gay people are like and it's odd because there's all this positivity and then there's always a flip side … the negativity. I saw one today. I was on my phone and it was this teenage girl that was with her parents, and they said, she's not allowed girls over because they don't want their daughter with a queer kid … I felt kind of bad [thinking] how do they not understand? I don't understand how they can really say that without having a queer kid themselves. And … they're just kids … (Oakley)

> Fox News is a big thing in [my] house … I watch that on the television on a daily basis, like every day, and … the stuff that they say on there and the stuff that they keep coming back to it just literally

> takes a toll on a person … they've got a story on there every day . . . And then they've targeted specific people … just people that they've encountered in news stories that they can exaggerate … There's just so many people with views that have just been twisted because of the things that have been said on Facebook, and the people on there will keep it going. Once they hear from the news and these fake news stories about men in the women's change rooms and trying to get in there to rape the women, [I think], what the hell are you even talking about? (Phoenix)
>
> Negative portrayals will … make people view queer people more negatively. I think that's how media works. (River)

Participants described how these negative portrayals trickled into everyday conversations, reinforcing stigma and creating hostile environments:

> Media is … still very much uneducated. And you see every day from what mainstream media is portraying, people pretend … it's just basically cisgender folks doing representations, and talking about or on our behalf … they don't understand that even though we are different, we are all humans, we are all the same. (Ari)
>
> So then all these people have these negative views about it and it just keeps getting worse and worse because then they get so ignorant that no one tells them that it's not OK. And if they do, people just ignore it. And it just keeps getting worse … (Rowan)
>
> When people are negatively portrayed on the Internet, it shines light on the people that don't support and don't like it … When you see pride flags up in Pride Month, sometimes I hear people say, "man, these people, these queer people, they're getting so much representation, they don't need it. There's so many queer flags I wish they would just stop putting them up." And that that is not, not a very good community building thing. (Reese)

Participants described the profound impact of these negative messages, which led many to conceal or minimize their identities. Media-fueled stereotypes and fear of rejection or judgment created lasting harm to self-esteem, confidence, and mental health:

> It definitely took a toll with the way I've viewed my body and just my whole entire person in general. (Sloan)
>
> I've seen how they react to these things on TV, and it just makes me want to keep everything to myself. (Emery)
>
> I don't express myself as much as [others do] I only tell very few people, and I keep a lot of things personal " so it lowers my confidence. (Rowan)
>
> It definitely doesn't help in making me want to be open … My mom watches some things that don't make me feel great … because this person's talking negatively about something that I relate to and something that I am. (Everest)

Participants painted a vivid picture of how persistent negativity in media and policy narratives deeply shapes the lived experience of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. From the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes to the internalization of fear and shame, these external portrayals carry far-reaching consequences that affect not just how queer youth are seen, but how they see themselves.

Institutionalized marginalization

While the purpose of this study was to explore how 2SLGBTQIA+ youth experience and respond to negative queer sentiments in mainstream media, participants repeatedly steered the conversation toward the Saskatchewan pronoun policy. Although interview questions focused on participants' experiences with media portrayals, social media interactions, and the emotional impacts of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ content, participants frequently introduced the policy unprompted or extended their responses to connect media narratives to its impacts, illustrating how media discourse and education policy are experienced as interconnected rather than separate phenomena. For example, one participant said, "they have to get signed consent forms … that one really bugged me," illustrating how policy was experienced as a direct extension of broader narratives. They viewed this legislation as a tangible and deeply personal extension of the hostility they encountered in media and society, which transformed harmful rhetoric into institutionalized discrimination embedded in the very systems meant to support students. From a structural stigma perspective, this reflects how policy operates as a provincial-level mechanism that embeds stigma within institutional practices, shaping the conditions under which students are recognized and protected.

Participants discussed both the requirement for parental consent for chosen names and pronouns and a perceived removal of 2SLGBTQIA+ content from school curricula. Although the revisions in *the Education Act*, *1995* do not explicitly mandate content removal, the government passed a directive to pause third-party programs for sex education (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). These changes were seen not only as a broader move away from inclusive education, but also as a dangerous reinforcement of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ narratives:

> The GSA in my school. I went a couple times last year, and then it shut down. (Reese)
>
> Before the notwithstanding clause, people used to come into schools and teach students about safe sex education and about the LGBT community and it's just, then they had information to base these facts on, but now they don't have anything. (Quinn)
>
> People that were protesting against the education of the LGBTQ+ curriculum in schools … Alberta, Saskatchewan, and then New Brunswick, I believe, were all three of those provinces … They cited the LGBTQ community as "brainwashing" children. (Drew)
>
> I have really, really strong beliefs opposing that. I did not believe that that should be taken out of schools at all … I don't know why someone would take that out of a curriculum. (Drew)

The pronoun policy was described as especially painful. Participants expressed feelings of sadness, frustration, and betrayal, and many saw the legislation as politically motivated and profoundly damaging to their sense of safety and self-worth:

> In Saskatchewan … they have to get signed consent forms … that one really bugged me. That one upset me a lot … to basically have to take that big step back. (Sloan)

> It makes me really upset that we're going right back to it with the notwithstanding clause. (Quinn)

> I think that the government is completely abhorrent when it comes to this stuff. I think that they've made so many wrong moves too … and then completely disregarded the view of the entire community at that point and it was just a desperate attempt to get those votes. That's all that was in my eyes. I think that that is the worst thing ever for no reason. (Phoenix)

> The legislation and everything, it's really pushing history back … and I think that sometimes it gets really scary … because you feel as though you're being attacked yourself. (Drew)

Several participants described the ripple effects of this institutionalization on public attitudes, making discrimination more visible and seemingly more socially acceptable, and emboldening others to express judgment and hostility more openly:

> Discrimination is something that's constantly a problem in the system … so it's unavoidable. It's just that I feel more could be done to actually making the change. Kinda contain it and not be all over the place. Now it's almost like everywhere you go there is discrimination everywhere. (Ari)

> When you see protests and anti LGBTQ in education and in different types of things, that really allows people to make it their own way of judging and making an opinion known … when it doesn't need to be. (Drew)

> It's like they're judging us before they even know us … People just see us as like a burden. (Indigo)

> It's very easy for people to react negatively to things that they don't have enough knowledge on or are afraid [of]. (Milan)

Participants saw the formal codification of these restrictions as not only legitimizing public discrimination but also transforming school spaces that should foster growth and belonging into environments where 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are treated as problems to be solved rather than students to be supported. This suggests that safety and inclusion are not equivalent, as participants described environments shaped by policy where they felt excluded and unsupported, even in spaces intended to provide care and protection.

Coping and resilience

When asked how they cope with anti-2SLGBTQIA+ messages, participants clearly

distinguished between strategies used to manage negativity in mainstream and social media versus the more inescapable challenges posed by the pronoun policy. Participants reported intentionally controlling their online environments or avoiding harmful content altogether in order to protect their mental well-being:

> I kind of just ignore them and go past them so that I don't have to deal with all the negativity that's there because that brings down my mood a lot. I just think, "What's the point of engaging with something that won't bring anything good to my day?" (Reese)

> Because how algorithms work and stuff, I don't want to make them any more popular than they are. So I try to block or just swipe away … It's like avoiding it altogether so I don't have to think about it. (River)

> I feel like it's just totally unnecessary trying to … talk to them or educate them about it. So I just go ahead and report the account. (Ari)

> There are a lot of homophobic people that are like "ew, this is gross. Go get a life." And of course, there are people that fight back, but the comments are pretty gruesome … A lot of them are emojis of the Gay Pride flag and the trans flag equaling throwing up and gross emojis. And I always dislike those or report them. (Reese)

Support from friends, family, and online communities were described as having an important role in helping participants process their emotions, feel heard, and gain strength:

> I'll talk about it as much as I want to my family or friends … me ranting about it is basically the way I cope with it. They will listen, and they understand how I feel that way. It helps because it's not just me holding it all in; I can let it out and know someone hears me. (Sloan)

> It doesn't always have to be a queer person you can talk to either. Like my best friend. I can come to him and talk to him about it too, and he's very "forget about it" … That support is really comforting, knowing he's there. (Emery)

> I strictly follow people I enjoy … So I think I have a healthy community. (Ellison)

In contrast to harmful content, participants also described how positive representation on social media, whether in videos or in movies, helped build confidence and a sense of connection:

> There's this one [on] social media. Her name is Dylan. She's a trans female. She is very cool and she's very public and she's very, I don't know, cool and inspiring. And just based off the way she portrays herself, puts herself out there. It's very inspiring. So, I think there's a lot of things on social media that can inspire people like me, younger kids as well and, or older. Anyone around the world, basically. (Sloan)

> TikTok was my biggest resource because it allowed me to get support from people I didn't know … Like even just watching that stuff allowed me to be a little bit more confident. (Drew)

> There's a bunch of other creators I've seen that have made little videos of them and their boyfriends or them and their girlfriends or them and their partners getting together. It is very comforting in a way, kind of like I'm not alone. And there are other people out there that are going through the same things as me. And it's just it's really nice how diverse the community has gotten. (Oakley)

> I know there's a lot of movies that are coming out [that I] actually really enjoy. I think they are done well, that are portraying gay people. (Ellison)

> Social media was helpful for me … because we're such a small conservative town, so for me it's really good, because I'm seeing . . . people out there who are like me. (Emery)

> The media helped me really figure out who I am and it gave me perspective. (Tatum)

Many participants turned to personal interests and hobbies for reprieve, whether through artistic expression, physical activity, or immersive entertainment:

> I started exercising … that's my therapy. I pull out all my frustration and my heart into my workout session … That's my way of dealing with what I see online. I don't have to think about it when I'm just focused on feeling better. (Ari)

> If I'm really upset about something, I'll make an art piece or something in the moment … It's a way for me to express everything that's too much to say in words and let it out. (Ellison)

> I'll watch my TV shows … Shows like Arcane … something that I enjoy, something that I can get lost in. (Tatum)

Unlike social media, policy could not be swiped away or blocked. Participants described the pronoun policy as a structural and deeply personal threat, eroding their sense of self and agency, and removing care and protection in school to which they are entitled. Participants described it as a wrong, a violation of rights, an attack, a target, a cause for fear, and a lack of safety:

> Not allowing children to identify with their own pronouns before the age of 18 or 16 without parental consent … that's really, really anti-LGBTQ+ and it's just wrong and I feel like it's a violation of a person's rights. (Drew)

> Seeing people nowadays having to fight a lot more than normal … like this is the government coming after kids … it's really concerning for me. (Quinn)

> It's really hard for especially youth to speak up about that because it just puts a target on your back again, like it's the worst … because

> you're automatically labeled as being as being part of the community, and that's super dangerous nowadays. At least here. (Phoenix)
>
> I was really confused as to why … LGBTQ+ curriculum can't be taught in schools. Because to me, if I was younger and I was able to be taught about that in school, I would have loved to have that … because I personally needed a resource like that growing up. I needed someone to tell me that it was OK to be who I was at the time and that there were different types and educating about the different types of identity … Someone shouldn't have to come out of the closet … I just feel that should be a normalized thing to be gay and to be who you want to be whenever you want to be it … being gay can't be a negative thing because to me it's the same as being straight. (Drew)
>
> If I were in school right now and I was one of those kids, I would be scared … I wouldn't feel safe in the environment. (Sloan)

Participants demonstrated a wide range of coping mechanisms for navigating anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in the media, often relying on avoidance, social connection, creative expression, and affirming content. However, when it came to discriminatory policy, participants expressed a sense of powerlessness and fear that could not be escaped with individual strategies alone. These policies represented not just a personal attack, but a systemic failure that left youth feeling unsupported, targeted and unsafe.

Pride, and future outlook

Despite the persistent challenges posed by anti-2SLGBTQIA+ messages and policies, participants also shared personal moments of pride and belonging that affirmed their identities and fueled their hope for the future. These personal milestones, such as coming out, experiencing love, or feeling seen, were not free from struggle, but they served as evidence of resilience and strength:

> I did decide to come out at the beginning of grade 10 and after coming out I had more support than I actually anticipated. While I was waiting, waiting to come out for so long … it did affect a few of my relationships and my friendships at the time. But I had a village of people who supported me … I don't give myself enough credit for how strong I was … I'm really proud of myself for being unapologetically me. (Drew)
>
> When I came out on Instagram … that was a big milestone for me … being able to post and be comfortable in my sexuality. (Sloan)
>
> Realizing that I could be in love. And that I wouldn't be single forever because I always kind of had small crushes, but never really major but then I actually realized that I liked someone … and they loved me back and it was so amazing. That's kind of a milestone for me. (Reese)
>
> Just kind of being comfortable with myself … It's saying that I'm happy to have [been] found or discovered. (Tatum)

Despite the institutional reality facing youth, moments of visibility and validation still extended into school. Participants found inspiration in others who publicly support queer identities:

> We had a substitute teacher come to the school … and he was very open … he wasn't hiding anything. And he came as a sub the one day and I went and told my teacher that this stuff was really awesome. So, she recommended [him for a] part time position that they needed and he spent the rest of the year at our school teaching. (Emery)

> I've heard from a lot of other educators that they will not be listening to the notwithstanding clause. It's just so, so great to hear, because no one should have to go through that. (Quinn)

Hope was not about ignoring the difficulties they faced, but about holding onto the belief that change was possible. Their experiences reflected optimism that the future can be more inclusive.

The following section discusses these themes as findings in relation to broader academic literature, drawing connections between participants' experiences and established research on identity development and systemic challenges.

Findings and discussion

This study explored how 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in Saskatchewan experience and respond to anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in mainstream media. The prominence of education policy in the findings was not predetermined, but emerged inductively from participant narratives. The findings of the study illustrate how these sentiments relate to social and embedded systemic bias within schools and communities. Participants described how negative portrayals in the media shaped family attitudes, reinforced social isolation, and intersected with educational policies that directly restricted their identities and impacted their well-being. Consistent with the MSF, these experiences reflect the cumulative impact of distal and proximal stressors, while also demonstrating how, from a structural stigma perspective, these stressors are embedded within institutional rules and practices, where policies such as the pronoun policy function as mechanisms that formalize and legitimize constraints on gender-diverse students (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014). While many participants developed coping or resilience strategies to manage these impacts, such as peer support, creative expression, and online communities, their efforts did not counteract the systemic barriers embedded through policy within their school environments. The findings highlight how institutional policies can reinforce exclusion and amplify minority stress, and how they shape student experiences and well-being within school environments.

Media's influence on family acceptance and school climate

A recurring theme in this study was the role of media in shaping not just public perceptions but also family attitudes toward 2SLGBTQIA+ identities. While not all home environments presented themselves as challenges, many participants shared that negative portrayals of 2SLGBTQIA+ people in the media influenced parental attitudes and reinforced environments where these youth felt compelled to hide aspects of themselves. While participants also described stereotypical portrayals in media,

these were more often linked to how they saw themselves and their confidence, whereas broader media narratives were described as shaping family attitudes and home environments. These findings align with research indicating that exposure to anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in the media increases social isolation and mental health risks, particularly in households where parental attitudes are shaped by misinformation (Buhr, 2023; Ramos et al., 2022; Simes, 2023). Given that adolescence is a critical period for identity development, the combination of hostile media portrayals and unsupportive family environments intensifies the stressors faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ youth (Schwab et al., 2022). Participants expressed this, and described the need for more education to combat it.

From media rhetoric to institutional policy

While previous research has illustrated the role of media in reinforcing and perpetuating discriminatory policies (Buhr, 2023; Fields & Wotipka, 2022), this study found that such policies and legislation reinforce the exclusionary narratives that helped justify them. Participants described the pronoun policy as reinforcing media-driven stigma into school environments, making discrimination a structural, rather than merely social, concern. From a structural stigma perspective, this reflects how stigma becomes embedded within institutional rules and practices, where policies formalize and legitimize exclusion. Unlike online hostility, which these participants found strategies to avoid, participants shared that these restrictive policies could not be "swiped away," but instead become embedded in their daily lives. This transition from social media or public debate to reinforced restriction underscores the institutionalization of stigma and exacerbates the cumulative impact of minority stress (Meyer, 2003; van der Star et al., 2021).

Resilience and coping strategies

As stated above, despite facing institutional barriers, participants described strategies to manage stress, including avoiding certain apps or programs, developing supportive peer networks, and engaging in creative or physical activities. While participants expressed that it was not right that they needed to develop such strategies in the first place, these coping mechanisms did provide temporary relief, but did not eliminate the broader impact of systemic discrimination.

These findings illustrate how distal stressors, such as exclusionary media narratives and policy decisions, are internalized by youth and give rise to proximal stressors, including fear of rejection, identity concealment, and internalized stigma. Participant narratives reveal the cumulative toll of having to adapt to environments that fail to affirm their identities.

Prior research highlights the role of positive representation, affirming educators, and inclusive curricula in mitigating minority stress (Poteat et al., 2019; Fields & Wotipka, 2022). This study reinforces the need for supportive policies and the provision of education that actively counteract stigma rather than reinforce it. Paralleling the literature (Frost & Meyer, 2023), participants made it clear that the burden of resilience ought never be placed solely on marginalized youth.

Hope and resistance

Despite the challenges they faced, participants expressed determination and hope for a more inclusive future. Many participants viewed the resilience of their peers and actions of their allies as a source of strength, emphasizing that change is possible. Specifically described were supportive educators, with one even refusing to comply with the restrictive policies. This was seen as an important counterweight to institutional marginalization. This aligns with findings from other studies describing the importance of allyship that affirm 2SLGBTQIA+ identities (Buhr, 2023; Russell et al., 2021).

Implications for policy and education

This study provides new insights into how anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments, particularly in media and policy, shape student experiences and perceptions of safety and inclusion in schools. While previous research has demonstrated the negative effects of hostile school climates (Fantus & Newman, 2021; Fields & Wotipka, 2022; Russell et al., 2021), this study highlights the ways in which mainstream media rhetoric intersects with and legitimizes restrictive policies and, consequentially, reinforces institutionalized bias. This legitimacy exacerbates exclusion (Buhr, 2023; Loewen Walker & Adesanya, 2024; Ramos et al., 2022). Participants in this study explained how this amplifies minority stress and reduces access to important resources.

Education policies must prioritize student safety and inclusion rather than respond to ideological pressures. Schools must uphold their legal and ethical responsibility to provide non-discriminatory environments for students (*The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code, 2018*; Kahne et al., 2025) rather than reinforce a climate of silence and exclusion (Denison et al., 2023; Kosciw et al., 2022). Ministries of Education must take an active role in providing educators with the guidance and support, and students with the protections necessary to challenge discrimination and affirm 2SLGBTQIA+ identities (McBrien et al., 2022; Fields & Wotipka, 2022), recognizing that in contested or hostile environments, these efforts may not always occur simultaneously in practice. As the findings of this study suggest, policy alone is insufficient if students do not experience these environments as supportive and inclusive in practice. Only then can the ministry claim that it is supporting the well-being of all students.

Additionally, this study illustrates the perpetual gap in media literacy within education systems. Participants consistently reported that parental attitudes toward gender and sexuality were shaped by misinformation and media framing, creating and perpetuating additional barriers to student safety. While previous research has examined media's role in shaping public perceptions (Ramos et al., 2022; Buhr, 2023), this study extends those findings by demonstrating how institutional policy exacerbates these narratives and directly influences student well-being at the school level. Again, systems of education must proactively equip educators, students, and families with resources that counteract misinformation and provide accurate, affirming representations of 2SLGBTQIA+ identities (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017; Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014).

Even within contested or restrictive policy environments, there remain opportunities to support 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in meaningful ways. Participants in this study identified the importance of individual educators, peer networks, and informal supports in shaping their sense of belonging and safety. While systemic policy change

is critical, schools and educators can still foster respectful classroom environments, challenge harmful language, and provide affirming interactions where possible within existing constraints. These practices, though sometimes limited in scope, were described by participants as significant in mitigating harm and supporting well-being.

Participants described it as abhorrent that policy decisions are driven by ideology rather than the lived experiences of those affected. Participants emphasized that policy decisions should be informed by the voices of those impacted, influenced by their needs, and shaped to support them rather than imposed to expose them.

Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights, the sample size was relatively small (15 participants). This is important for rich data, but it limits the generalizability of the study. Important to note also, is that while participants discussed policy in relation to their experiences, this study did not explicitly prompt them to reflect on specific policies. A more direct focus on the policy discussion raised by participants may have revealed deeper insights into how institutional decisions shape identity and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Lastly, though we had originally intended that the study would engage participants aged 13–19, following concerns raised by the ethics research board at our institution, participant ages were delimited to 16–19. While the pronoun policy specifically targets youth under 16, the experiences and perspectives of older youth remain highly relevant. Many participants reflected on how the policy would have affected them just a few years earlier, sharing sentiments of fear and exclusion. Some also continued to navigate the same school environments shaped by the policy, and remained subject to its social impacts, notwithstanding their ages. As such, their insights are highly relevant to the personal and systemic consequences of exclusionary policies within schools.

Recommendations for future research

To build on these findings, a comparative analysis across provinces with similar and different policy approaches could provide a broader perspective on how specific governance structures and policies shape the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Additionally, exploring the role of educators and school administrators and their responses to policies such as the Saskatchewan's pronoun law would offer valuable insights into institutional restrictions and advocacy within the education system in order to support the well-being of all students.

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