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Towards a conceptual model of queer social safety: insights from LGBTQ+ narratives of safety and unsafety

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ABSTRACT

Social safety has recently emerged as an important framework for understanding how environments influence health and well-being, yet it remains underexplored within LGBTQ+ research. This study examined LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences of social safety and social unsafety and developed an empirically grounded conceptualisation of queer social safety. Ninety-seven LGBTQ+ adults living in Italy responded to two open-ended questions regarding experiences of social safety and social unsafety. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and used to develop a conceptual model of queer social safety. Four interrelated themes were identified: (1) governability of visibility; (2) habitability of social spaces; (3) relational legitimisation between inclusivity and hostility; and (4) subjective experiences and outcomes of social safety/unsafety. Findings suggest that queer social safety is constructed through ongoing processes of meaning-making and appraisal in which relational and contextual experiences are integrated into evaluations of recognition, legitimacy, belonging and protection. The process-oriented conceptual model we developed from our work explains how these appraisal processes give rise to distinct patterns of agency and identity pride, vigilance and self-regulation, or withdrawal and internalised stigma, while identifying recognition as a key relational process underpinning the psychological construction of queer social safety.

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minoritised (LGBTQ+) individuals experience significant disparities in mental and physical health compared with their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Hoy-Ellis 2023). A substantial body of research has documented elevated rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, substance use, and poorer overall well-being among LGBTQ+ populations, highlighting the impact of stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion on health trajectories (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2022, 2024). These disparities have been widely explained through minority stress theory (MST), which conceptualises LGBTQ+ individuals as being exposed to chronic distal stressors (e.g. discrimination, victimisation, and violence) together with proximal stressors (e.g. expectations of rejection, concealment, and internalised stigma) arising from their stigmatised social status (Meyer 2003; Hendricks and Testa 2012).

Although this body of research has been instrumental in documenting the harmful effects of stigma, scholars have argued that focusing exclusively on adversity provides only a partial account of LGBTQ+ lives (Levitt, Kehoe, and Hand 2023; Cipollina et al. 2024). Consequently, strengths-based perspectives emphasising resilience, social support, community connectedness, and positive identity processes have gained increasing prominence (Rostosky et al. 2018; Petrocchi et al. 2020; Flynn et al. 2024). Within this broader shift, social safety theory (SST; Slavich 2020) has emerged as a promising framework. It proposes that humans have a fundamental need for social safety, defined as the perception of being accepted,

connected, and protected within social environments, whereas rejection and exclusion may trigger vigilance and self-protective responses (Slavich 2020; Diamond and Alley 2022).

For LGBTQ+ individuals, social safety may be particularly relevant because stigma and identity invalidation can undermine belonging, recognition, and protection, whereas affirming relationships and inclusive environments may foster acceptance, connection, and social protection (Diamond and Alley 2022). Conversely, social unsafety refers to the appraisal that a social environment does not provide sufficient recognition, legitimacy, protection, or belonging to support authentic social engagement. Experiences of social unsafety may arise from both the presence of social threat cues and the absence of safety cues. Within SST, social threat refers to cues signalling rejection, exclusion, or harm, whereas social unsafety reflects the broader appraisal that a social environment cannot be safely inhabited. Consequently, social unsafety may contribute to vigilance, withdrawal, and strategies aimed at managing potential threat (Diamond and Alley 2022).

Although complementary, MST and SST address different analytical questions. MST explains how stigma-related distal and proximal stressors influence health, whereas SST focuses on how individuals appraise whether social environments are sufficiently safe for authentic engagement. Minority stress processes may therefore contribute to social safety appraisals by shaping expectations about social environments.

Currently, social safety remains relatively underexplored within LGBTQ+ research. Existing studies have focused on related constructs such as social support, community connectedness, resilience, and identity affirmation (e.g. Cavarra, Pepping, and Anderson 2025; Roberts et al. 2025). Although these constructs address specific protective resources, social safety captures a broader understanding of the relational and contextual experiences that make an environment inhabitable, trustworthy, and supportive. Recent qualitative work has identified social safety cues including supportive people and communities, LGBTQ+-friendly spaces, visible symbols of inclusion, and affirming interpersonal behaviours (Katinaitė, Petručionis, and Žardeckaitė-Matulaitienė 2026). Scholarship in sexuality studies has challenged the assumption that social safety in LGBTQ+ individuals is an inherent property of particular places, conceptualising it instead as a relational, negotiated, and contextually situated experience emerging through interactions between identities, social spaces, and broader social conditions (e.g. Hartal 2017; Charlton 2025). However, less attention has been paid to the psychological processes through which these conditions come to be experienced as social safety or social unsafety. This raises an important theoretical question: namely, how do LGBTQ+ individuals come to experience social environments as socially safe or socially unsafe? Addressing this question requires a conceptual account of the psychological construction of queer social safety.

The Italian context provides a relevant setting for this investigation. Despite advances in LGBTQ+ visibility and legal recognition, including the introduction of civil unions in 2016, same-sex marriage is still unavailable, comprehensive national anti-discrimination legislation has not been enacted, and public debates surrounding sexual and gender diversity remain highly polarised (Feo 2022; Rosati et al. 2026). Heteronormative and cisnormative expectations also persist in families, schools, healthcare settings, workplaces, and religious communities (Scandurra et al. 2021). This coexistence of inclusion and exclusion makes Italy an informative context for examining social safety and unsafety.

Against this background, the present study examined how LGBTQ+ individuals experience and interpret social safety and social unsafety across everyday social contexts. We use the term *queer social safety* to refer broadly to experiences of social safety among sexual and gender minoritised individuals, while recognising that the word queer may also function as a specific identity label for some participants. Our aim was not only to identify the relational and contextual dimensions shaping queer social safety, but also to explain the psychological processes through which LGBTQ+ individuals come to experience social environments as socially safe or socially unsafe. Specifically, we sought to develop an empirically grounded conceptual model of the psychological construction of queer social safety. We adopted a qualitative approach to explore these processes.

Materials and methods

Procedures and participants

This qualitative study is part of a broader mixed-methods project investigating social safety, social unsafety, and minority stress among LGBTQ+ individuals living in Italy.

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling *via* social media, LGBTQ+ community networks, and LGBTQ+ associations. Eligibility criteria included: (a) self-identifying as LGBTQ+; (b) being at least 18 years old; and (c) residing in Italy. No incentives were provided for participation. Before engaging in the study, participants received information about it and provided electronic informed consent.

The study complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and the European General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and was approved by the Psychological Ethics Committee of the University of Naples Federico II (Protocol No. 7/2026; date: 15 January 2026). Data were collected anonymously through a secure online survey platform between February and April 2026.

The final sample comprised 97 LGBTQ+ individuals aged between 18 and 67 years ($M=29.57$, $SD=11.70$), and resident in Italy.

Participants identified as cisgender women (37.1%, $n=36$), cisgender men (29.9%, $n=29$), nonbinary individuals (10.3%, $n=10$), transgender men (7.2%, $n=7$), transgender women (4.1%, $n=4$), questioning (3.1%, $n=3$), or other gender-diverse identities (8.2%, $n=8$). Sexual orientation included gay or lesbian (43.3%, $n=42$), bisexual (30.9%, $n=30$), heterosexual (8.2%, $n=8$), asexual (6.2%, $n=6$), pansexual (5.2%, $n=5$), queer (2.1%, $n=2$), or other/questioning orientations (4.1%, $n=4$).

Most participants identified as White (96.9%, $n=94$); 40.2% ($n=39$) reported having completed high school or a lower level of education, whereas 59.8% ($n=58$) reported holding at least a university degree, including postgraduate qualifications. Participants resided in different parts of the country, with 20.6% ($n=20$) living in Northern Italy, 25.8% ($n=25$) in Central Italy, and 53.6% ($n=52$) in Southern Italy.

Measures

The qualitative dataset comprised responses to two open-ended questions exploring experiences of social safety and social unsafety in relation to participants' LGBTQ+ identities, administered at the end of a broader survey following demographic and quantitative measures on social safety, minority stress, and psychological well-being.

Participants were presented with the following definition of social safety: 'By social safety, we mean the experience of perceiving that one's relationships and social environments are accepting, respectful, caring, and protective, allowing one to feel socially safe in relation to others.' They were then presented with this prompt:

'Please describe an experience in which, in relation to your LGBTQ+ identity, you felt socially safe or socially unsafe. In your response, please describe what happened, the social context in which it occurred, what made you feel socially safe (or socially unsafe), how you experienced the situation, and how you responded.'

After completing the first narrative, participants received a complementary prompt:

'If your previous narrative described an experience of feeling socially unsafe, please now describe an experience in which you felt socially safe. Conversely, if your previous narrative described an experience of feeling socially safe, please now describe an experience in which you felt socially unsafe.'

Open-ended survey questions were used to elicit detailed written accounts of the subjective, relational, contextual, and emotional processes through which participants experienced and interpreted social safety and social unsafety. Although they did not permit the iterative probing characteristic of qualitative interviews, participants could describe personally meaningful experiences in their own words, and did so across a large and diverse sample.

All analyses were conducted on the original Italian language narratives. After the analytic process was completed and illustrative quotations selected, excerpts were translated into English by the research team and reviewed by a native English speaker to enhance linguistic accuracy while preserving their original meaning.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun and Clarke 2012, 2021), brought together with Naeem et al. (2023) systematic approach to conceptual model development.

Consistent with a constructivist and interpretive orientation, the analysis was conceived as a reflexive process of meaning-making in which participants' narratives, theoretical frameworks, and researchers' interpretations were brought into dialogue. Accordingly, the thematic structure should be understood as an interpretive construction rather than an exhaustive classificatory framework.

Analysis began with repeated readings of participants' written accounts to identify recurring patterns of meaning related to experiences of social safety and social unsafety. The first and second authors independently generated initial codes by identifying recurrent semantic units and keywords indicative of underlying experiential meanings (Naeem et al. 2023). Coding was predominantly inductive. Emerging themes were subsequently interpreted in dialogue with SST and the minority stress literature.

The first and second authors compared and discussed their coding, refining codes into broader themes based on conceptual coherence and meaningful relationships. Differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion with the larger research team. Consistent with RTA, themes were conceptualised as interpretive patterns capturing ways of experiencing and negotiating social safety and social unsafety. Constant comparison across narratives revealed recurring experiential patterns reflecting the different ways in which participants constructed social safety and social unsafety within each theme.

For analytic clarity, these recurring patterns were organised along an experiential continuum comprising patterns of greater social safety, negotiation and ambivalence, and greater social unsafety. These patterns represent analytic heuristics that summarise recurring configurations of meaning across participants' accounts rather than fixed categories, developmental stages, linear trajectories, or positions occupied by individuals; they may vary across contexts, relationships, and time.

The final stage of analysis involved the development of an integrative synthesis and a conceptual model of queer social safety/unsafety grounded in participants' accounts. Following Naeem et al. (2023), the final model was developed as a contextually situated interpretive framework synthesising the relational, contextual, and identity-related configurations emerging from the data, without implying a linear progression.

To enhance transparency, a supplemental file to this paper presents representative semantic units and initial codes underlying the development of the final themes. Throughout the analysis, researchers engaged in ongoing reflexive discussion concerning codes, themes, and interpretations. All themes and subthemes were reviewed collectively by the research team before finalisation. To preserve thematic coherence, each illustrative narrative excerpt was assigned exclusively to the theme judged to best represent its predominant meaning.

Researcher reflexivity

The research team comprised scholars with expertise in LGBTQ+ psychology, minority stress, qualitative research, and clinical psychology, representing diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and relationships to LGBTQ+ communities. Throughout the analytic process, reflexive discussions examined how researchers' backgrounds, experiences, and theoretical commitments shaped data interpretation while encouraging openness to unexpected meanings, alternative readings, and the iterative refinement of the conceptual model.

Results

Overview of themes

Reflexive thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four interrelated overarching themes, each organised along an experiential continuum reflecting recurring patterns of social safety and social unsafety (Figure 1). Within each theme, three recurring experiential patterns were present: greater social safety, negotiation and ambivalence, and greater social unsafety.

The themes presented below describe how participants interpreted experiences across visibility, social spaces, and relationships in relation to social safety and social unsafety. Participant frequencies are

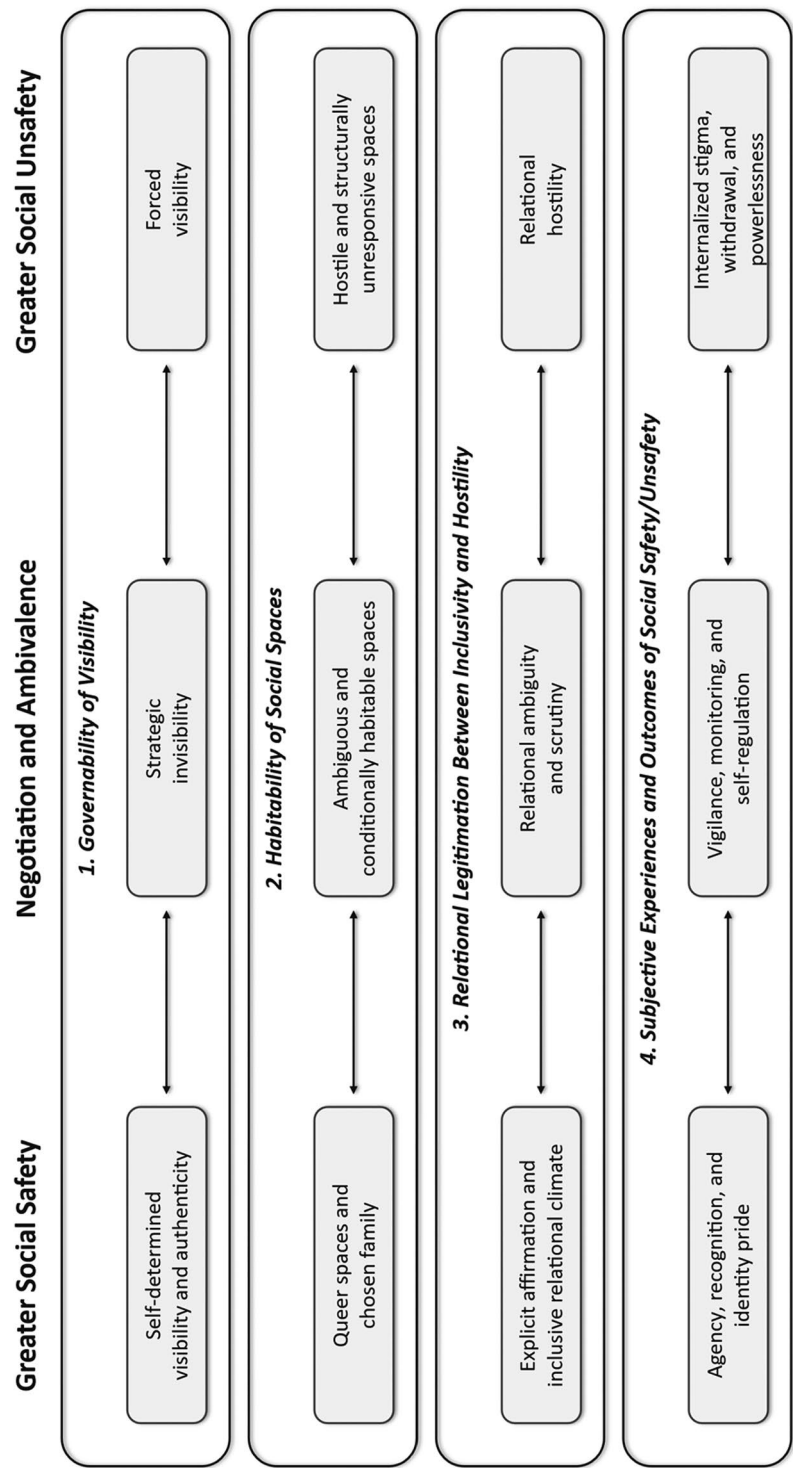


Figure 1. Experiential patterns across the four themes of queer social safety and social unsafety. Notes. Themes are presented through recurring experiential patterns of greater social safety, negotiation and ambivalence, and greater social unsafety. Patterns are intended as analytic heuristics identifying recurring patterns of meaning across participants' accounts.

reported for each subtheme for transparency but should not be interpreted as indicators of thematic importance; each participant was counted only once per subtheme.

Governability of visibility

Participants described visibility as a process that required continual regulation across social contexts. Experiences of social safety depended on the ability to decide when, how, and to whom their LGBTQ+ identities became visible. Within the theme of governability of visibility, participants' accounts reflected three recurring experiential patterns: self-determined visibility; strategic invisibility; and forced visibility.

Self-determined visibility and authenticity (n = 20; 20.6%)

Narratives reflecting greater social safety described self-determined visibility as the ability to disclose their identities on their own terms. Coming out was typically portrayed as a carefully considered decision that became affirming and emotionally protective when met with acceptance. One participant described disclosing her attraction to women to her friends: 'I felt safe when I told my friends, while crying, that I liked a girl, and they didn't judge me but comforted and supported me' (22 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual).

Self-determined visibility also involved expressing one's identity without feeling compelled to conceal it. As one participant explained: 'I have never kept my sexual orientation secret, and although I am not someone who likes to draw attention to it, I found acceptance in people's words and actions' (33 years old, cisgender man, gay).

Not all forms of voluntary visibility involved explicit disclosure. Some participants described their identities in terms of everyday appearance, clothing, or behaviour, allowing authenticity to emerge without directly giving their LGBTQIA+ status a name: 'Over time I started wearing some feminine clothes. The need to experiment is gradually overcoming my need to feel safe' (24 years old, assigned male at birth, questioning).

Strategic invisibility (n = 24; 24.7%)

Patterns of negotiation and ambivalence were characterised by strategic invisibility, with participants intentionally regulating the visibility of their identities in contexts perceived as potentially unsafe. One participant described concealing his sexual orientation in the workplace: 'At work, I felt safe only as long as I didn't reveal that I was gay or allowed it to show. It was exhausting' (25 years old, cisgender man, gay).

Others described deliberately drawing upon normative privileges associated with appearance in order to avoid harassment or discrimination: 'It makes me angry that I even have to think this way, using the same privilege that oppresses me in order not to be oppressed, pretending to be someone I'm not just to avoid harassment' (25 years old, assigned male at birth, nonbinary, genderqueer).

Among gender-diverse participants, strategic invisibility often took the form of passing (i.e. being perceived as cisgender), allowing them to navigate everyday contexts while minimising anticipated rejection or discrimination: 'Today I pass as a cisgender man, and I have for years. If I don't disclose my identity, I'm always safe' (30 years old, transgender man, heterosexual).

Forced visibility (n = 12; 12.4%)

Narratives reflecting greater social unsafety described experiences in which visibility was imposed rather than chosen. Forced visibility most often involved outing. One participant recalled:

'During high school, I started dating a girl without telling many people. After the summer break, some classmates began treating me badly and introducing me to others as 'the lesbian.' I felt as though my entire class had turned against me.' (20 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual)

For some participants, involuntary disclosure had tangible social and occupational consequences: 'A few years ago, I applied for a job as a sales assistant, but I was not hired because other people outed me as a transgender woman without my consent' (24 years old, transgender woman, bisexual).

Participants also described institutional forms of forced visibility, as expressed by one nonbinary participant: 'At university, because I do not have an alias career, I am forced to come out constantly to professors and classmates' (23 years old, nonbinary, heterosexual).

Habitability of social spaces

Participants portrayed social spaces as active producers of safety and unsafety rather than neutral settings. Social environments were experienced as more or less inhabitable depending on the extent to which they were perceived as communicating belonging, recognition, and protection. Spaces became socially safe not because of their physical characteristics *per se*, but because of the relational norms and expectations that defined who belonged within them. Within the theme of habitability of social spaces, three recurring experiential patterns were evident: queer spaces and chosen family; ambiguous and conditionally habitable spaces; and hostile and structurally unresponsive contexts.

Queer spaces and chosen family (n=30; 30.9%)

Narratives reflecting greater social safety described both queer-oriented environments and meaningful relationships as spaces where vigilance could temporarily be lowered and identity expression could occur without fear of judgement:

'I feel 100% accepted for who I am when I go dancing at [an LGBTQ+ club]. I've never felt judged for how I was dressed, never been afraid of being harassed or attacked, and I could spend time with my gay friends without worrying that someone would bother us.' (23 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual)

Participants also highlighted the importance of chosen family and supportive friendship networks. Such relationships were experienced as protective and validating:

'A context in which I feel socially safe 99% of the time is my group of friends. I think this comes both from the validation of my identity and from being valued as a person in all my facets. They are, in part, the shield that protects me from a society where I often do not feel safe.' (27 years old, transgender man, gay)

Ambiguous and conditionally habitable spaces (n=56; 57.7%)

Participants described some contexts as potentially habitable, but only under certain conditions and with considerable uncertainty. Public environments were often described as offering greater opportunities for self-expression than smaller communities:

'When I am in larger and more socially advanced cities, I feel much freer and almost completely comfortable expressing my sexuality and my relationships. This is something I cannot do in my small town, where judgemental eyes are everywhere and rumours spread quickly.' (23 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual)

However, participants emphasised that the habitability of such spaces could quickly change depending on social interactions and responses:

'Paradoxically, the university is a context in which I have always experienced a great sense of safety, comfort, and respect. Because of the positive experiences I had over the years, I never expected that, right at the end of my studies, I would encounter someone who would suddenly make me feel the weight of my gender expression' (24 years old, assigned female at birth, nonbinary, genderqueer).

Hostile and structurally unresponsive spaces (n=38; 39.2%)

Narratives reflecting greater social unsafety described environments perceived as hostile, neglectful, or structurally incapable of protecting LGBTQ+ individuals:

'Social safety, as an LGBTQ+ person, has definitely decreased, both in perception and in practice, since right-wing governments came to power, not only in Italy but elsewhere as well' (52 years old, cisgender man, gay).

Others described experiences of social indifference communicating abandonment rather than direct hostility:

'I was beaten for no reason on a crowded street in the city centre. Shop owners and passersby did nothing – not a word, just looks of disapproval, as if the people who attacked me had done the right thing. I never reported it; it would have been useless.' (28 years old, cisgender man, pansexual)

At the interpersonal level, family rejection emerged as one of the most destabilising experiences of unsafety:

'The most significant loss of social safety in my life occurred when I told my mother that I was dating a girl. From that moment on, my world changed. I no longer felt safe in my own home.' (20 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual).

Relational legitimization between inclusivity and hostility

Whereas the previous theme focused on the habitability of social environments, this theme focuses on the quality of the relationships operating within them. Participants described relationships as sites where identities were legitimised, questioned, affirmed, or devalued, reflecting dynamics of recognition and exclusion. Within this theme, three recurring experiential patterns were identified: explicit affirmation and inclusive relational climates; relational ambiguity and scrutiny; and relational hostility.

Explicit affirmation and inclusive relational climates (n=60; 61.9%)

Narratives reflecting greater social safety described relationships characterised by acceptance, validation, and active support. Affirmation sometimes took the form of direct intervention against discrimination:

'With the people I love and surround myself with, I often feel safe and accepted in my nonbinary identity. They defend me, respect me, support me when I experience discrimination, and stand up for me even more than I stand up for myself.' (25 years old, assigned male at birth, nonbinary, queer)

Participants also emphasised the importance of explicit recognition of their identities:

'When I joined a gym, despite my documents still carrying my deadname, everyone welcomed me using my chosen name and allowed me to use the locker room corresponding to my gender' (24 years old, transgender woman, bisexual).

Relational ambiguity and scrutiny (n=30; 30.9%)

Patterns of negotiation and ambivalence were characterised by uncertainty regarding how one was perceived and evaluated by others. Participants described feeling watched, scrutinised, or silently judged:

'Walking down the street, especially on Saturday nights, you can often feel the mocking and aggressive gaze of groups of cisgender people simply because they realise that you are not like them.' (23 years old, transgender man, bisexual).

Anticipated judgement sometimes shaped behaviour before any explicit interaction occurred:

'I was in a clothing shop and perceived – or perhaps projected – uncertainty in the salesperson. I left to avoid further interactions and avoid exposing myself to more scrutiny' (29 years old, female assigned at birth, non-binary transmasculine, heterosexual).

Relational hostility (n=45; 46.4%)

Narratives reflecting greater social unsafety described experiences of explicit and implicit hostility. Direct verbal aggression in public settings was often experienced as particularly destabilising because of its unpredictability: 'I was walking my girlfriend to the underground while hugging her when a man got out of his car just to insult us. We immediately ran away' (25 years old, cisgender woman, lesbian).

Hostility originating from previously trusted relationships was experienced as especially painful:

'When I was 15, I told some friends that I was bisexual. One boy started shouting, 'Oh my God, she's bi!' and everyone began asking inappropriate questions and making jokes. Someone even said, 'That's disgusting'" (26 years old, cisgender woman, pansexual).

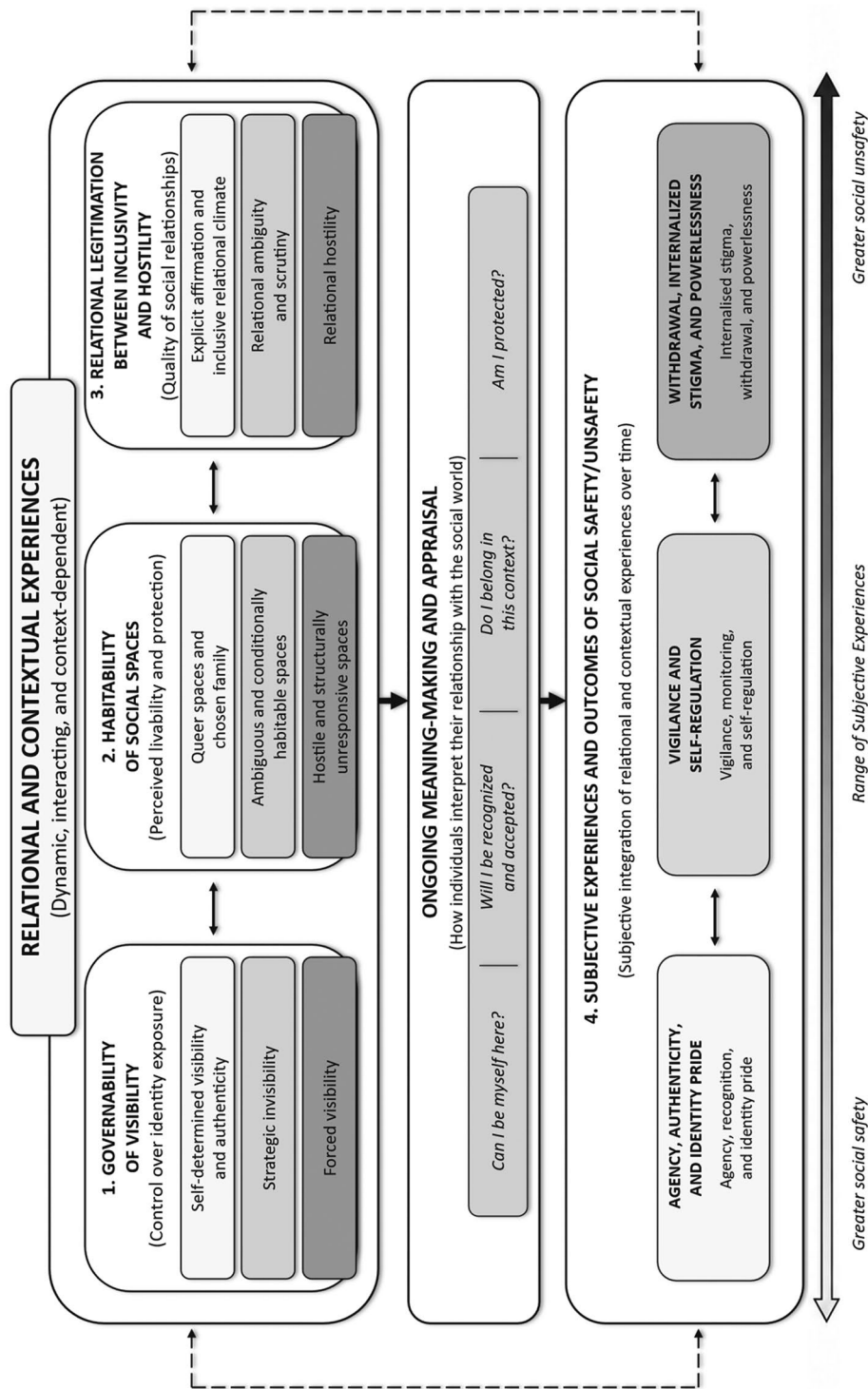


Figure 2. A process-oriented conceptual model of the psychological construction of queer social safety.
Notes. Double-headed arrows indicate feedback processes; dashed arrows indicate ongoing psychological processes.

Participants also described more subtle forms of hostility, including derogatory humour, stereotypes, and microaggressions:

“During a hospital internship, a senior colleague mocked another coworker for being ‘effeminate,’ implying that being gay was something negative. I felt extremely unsafe and distressed” (31 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual).

Subjective experiences and outcomes of social safety/unsafety

Unlike the previous themes, which focused on contextual and relational conditions, this theme captured how participants integrated experiences of social safety and social unsafety into broader understandings of themselves and the social world. These experiences shaped expectations about future social environments and informed subsequent appraisals of recognition, legitimacy, belonging, and protection. Three recurring experiential patterns were evident: agency, recognition, and identity pride; vigilance, monitoring, and self-regulation; and internalised stigma, withdrawal, and powerlessness.

Agency, recognition, and identity pride (n=65; 67.0%)

Narratives reflecting greater social safety described experiences in which LGBTQ+ identities became sources of agency, meaning, and personal value.

Some written accounts emphasised experiences of being recognised and reflected positively by others:

‘I have felt social safety and tranquillity at every Pride event I attended with friends. I felt a strong sense of belonging, freedom of expression, and the feeling that I was not wrong – that I could be loved’ (24 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual).

Others described identity pride as no longer needing to conceal or defend their LGBTQ+ identity, but experiencing it as a valued aspect of themselves:

‘With my friends, most of whom are part of the LGBTQ+ community, I feel completely myself. The way I express myself and even joke about sexuality makes me feel proud and, above all, lighter’ (20 years old, cisgender woman, lesbian).

Vigilance, monitoring, and self-regulation (n=39; 40.2%)

Patterns of negotiation and ambivalence reflected an ongoing appraisal, as participants monitored social environments, anticipated risk, and adjusted identity expression according to perceived safety.

Some described anticipating uncomfortable or emotionally unsafe interactions, leading them to avoid situations perceived as potentially threatening:

‘People are often uninformed and do not know how to interact with me respectfully, even when they know something about my story. This makes me feel constantly exposed and uncomfortable. I avoid many contexts I used to frequent before my gender affirmation because I need to protect myself emotionally.’ (27 years old, transgender man, gay)

Participants also described hypervigilance:

‘I am almost always afraid in crowded places when I am wearing makeup and carrying a handbag. I am a transgender woman and have not yet started hormone therapy. I am afraid of being attacked or mocked, and I do not know what the future holds.’ (25 years old, transgender woman, heterosexual)

Internalised stigma, withdrawal, and powerlessness (n=40; 41.2%)

Narratives reflecting greater social unsafety described situations in which stigmatising messages had become progressively internalised. Some participants described progressive withdrawal from social and educational participation:

‘I did not feel socially safe at school or at home after coming out as a transgender boy. I withdrew into myself, isolated myself at school most of the time, and eventually dropped out because of my insecurity’ (24 years old, transgender man, heterosexual).

Powerlessness and resignation were also evident:

'A teacher told me I was 'confused' and that I had to choose: 'Either men or women. It will pass; it is just a phase.' At the time, I did not have the courage to react, perhaps because deep down I did not fully accept myself either. I felt abnormal.' (22 years old, cisgender woman, bisexual)

Integrative synthesis and development of a conceptual model

Taken together, the four overarching themes were used to develop a process-oriented conceptual model explaining the psychological construction of queer social safety (Figure 2). The model explains how LGBTQ+ individuals come to experience the social world as safe – or unsafe – for authentic social engagement through ongoing processes of meaning-making and appraisal at the interface between individuals and their social environments.

Across participants' accounts, experiences of social safety appeared to revolve around a set of implicit questions that captured the core concerns underlying encounters with social environments: namely, Can I be myself here? Will I be recognised and accepted? Do I belong in this context? and Am I protected?

Existing frameworks offer complementary perspectives on these questions. MST explains how stigma-related experiences influence health and well-being, while sexuality studies show how heteronormative and cisnormative social arrangements shape opportunities for recognition, exclusion, and belonging. Our conceptual model focuses on the psychological interface between these sociocultural conditions and lived experience, explaining how they become integrated into experiences of social safety and social unsafety.

Specifically, the model conceptualises queer social safety as an ongoing process through which LGBTQ+ individuals make sense of the relationship between themselves and their social environments. When encountering a social context, individuals integrate multiple sources of information, including opportunities and constraints surrounding visibility, the habitability of social spaces, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and memories of previous experiences. Through this process of meaning-making and appraisal, relational, contextual, and identity-related experiences become integrated into evaluations of whether a particular environment affords sufficient recognition, legitimacy, belonging, and protection for authentic social engagement.

The first three themes represent interconnected domains through which individuals encounter the social world: governability of visibility, habitability of social spaces, and relational legitimation. Together, these dimensions provide the relational and contextual cues that inform ongoing appraisals of social safety. The fourth theme captures the subjective integration of these experiences over time. These appraisals shape broader expectations about oneself and the social world, giving rise to patterns of agency, authenticity, identity pride, vigilance, withdrawal, or internalised stigma. Vigilance and self-regulation are conceptualised as continuous appraisal processes through which individuals monitor and adapt to changing relational and contextual conditions.

Accordingly, queer social safety emerges as a psychological property of the relationship between individuals and their social worlds. The explanatory value of the model lies in showing how relational and contextual experiences become psychologically integrated into appraisals of recognition, legitimacy, belonging, and protection, giving rise to experiences of social safety and social unsafety.

Discussion

The present study developed an empirically grounded psychological conceptualisation of queer social safety. Findings suggest that queer social safety is a dynamic and relational process shaped by the interplay between visibility management, social environments, interpersonal relationships, and subjective meaning-making.

A central finding from this study concerns how participants described social safety. Across narratives, experiences of safety were rarely framed simply as the absence of stigma, discrimination, or rejection. Instead, participants emphasised recognition, protection, belonging, and legitimacy. These findings do not challenge MST but suggest that well-established minority stress processes also function as relational and contextual cues through which LGBTQ+ individuals appraise whether social environments are sufficiently safe for authentic engagement. While MST explains how stigma-related stressors affect health

(Meyer 2003; Hendricks and Testa 2012), SST complements this perspective by conceptualising social safety as involving an ongoing appraisal of social environments (Slavich 2020; Diamond and Alley 2022). Our findings extend this perspective by illustrating how appraisals of social safety are constructed through the integration of experiences related to visibility, social spaces, and interpersonal relationships into broader evaluations of recognition, legitimacy, belonging, and protection. They also contribute to recent scholarship calling for greater attention to protective and affirming LGBTQ+ experiences (e.g. Levitt, Kehoe, and Hand 2023; Cipollina et al. 2024).

A second contribution concerns the psychological construction of queer social safety. Previous research has identified a range of protective factors associated with LGBTQ+ well-being, including social support, identity affirmation, community connectedness, affirming environments, and authenticity (Rostosky et al. 2018; Petrocchi et al. 2020; Flynn et al. 2024). Our findings suggest that these experiences do not operate as independent protective resources; their significance depends on how they are interpreted within individuals' relationships with their social environments. Queer social safety emerges through ongoing processes of meaning-making and appraisal in which visibility, social spaces, and interpersonal relationships are integrated into evaluations of whether a particular context affords recognition, legitimacy, belonging, and protection. This shifts attention from identifying where social safety resides to explaining how multiple relational and contextual experiences are integrated into expectations about whether social environments can be authentically inhabited.

This perspective extends SST (Slavich 2020; Diamond and Alley 2022) by illustrating how appraisals of social safety develop through the continuous integration of multiple relational and contextual experiences across everyday life. At the same time, it complements MST (Meyer 2003; Hendricks and Testa 2012) by showing how minority stress processes become psychologically meaningful as individuals evaluate what these experiences imply about future possibilities for authentic social engagement. Experiences of discrimination, rejection, concealment, or internalised stigma therefore contribute not only to distress but also to broader expectations concerning recognition, legitimacy, belonging, and protection.

Importantly, these appraisal processes unfold within broader sociocultural structures. Heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and other systems of social regulation shape the institutional and relational contexts through which LGBTQ+ people navigate everyday life (e.g. Scandurra et al. 2021). The present model does not seek to relocate these processes from the social to the individual level. Instead, it explains how structural conditions become psychologically consequential through the meanings individuals attribute to everyday interactions, institutional practices, and social environments. In this way, the model connects structural power with lived experience by explaining how broader social arrangements become translated into everyday experiences of social safety and social unsafety.

Our findings also contribute to scholarship conceptualising queer safety as relational, negotiated, and spatially situated (Hartal 2017; Charlton 2025). Participants' accounts suggest that environments become psychologically inhabitable when they communicate opportunities for recognition and authentic participation. Even contexts generally perceived as affirming, such as universities or large urban settings, can become unsafe when relational dynamics change, whereas supportive relationships could temporarily render otherwise hostile environments psychologically inhabitable. These findings highlight that social safety is produced through the dynamic relationship between individuals and their social worlds rather than residing in places themselves.

Across all themes, recognition emerged as a key relational mechanism through which queer social safety was constructed. More than interpersonal affirmation, recognition involved experiencing one's identity as legitimate within a particular social world, fostering agency, authenticity, and identity pride. Conversely, identity invalidation undermined expectations of belonging and protection. Consistent with developmental and psychodynamic perspectives (Fonagy and Target 2003; Lemma 2013; Esposito et al. 2022), recognition appears to represent the relational process through which social environments become psychologically inhabitable over time.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the central psychological task identified by the present study is not simply coping with minority stress but constructing a sense that the social world can be inhabited with recognition, legitimacy, belonging, and protection. Seen from this perspective, queer social safety emerges as a dynamic psychological process through which LGBTQ+ individuals continuously negotiate their relationship with the social environments they inhabit.

Finally, the prominence of ambiguity, conditional safety, and contextual monitoring should be interpreted within the broader sociocultural context in which these narratives were produced. Participants were interviewed between February and April 2026, when increasing LGBTQ+ visibility coexisted with persistent political and public contestation surrounding gender and sexual diversity in Italy (Prearo and Trastulli 2025; Rosati et al. 2026). It is plausible that this sociocultural climate contributed to participants' accounts of ambiguity, conditional safety, and contextual monitoring. Given the cross-sectional qualitative design of the present study, these findings cannot establish whether such experiences are specific to this historical context or reflect more general characteristics of queer social safety. Rather, they suggest that queer social safety is historically situated, with its expression shaped by the interaction between enduring relational processes and changing sociocultural conditions.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, data were collected through written responses to open-ended survey questions rather than through interviews or focus groups. Although this approach enabled participation from diverse geographical areas, it limited opportunities for probing emerging themes. Narratives may have been influenced by the preceding quantitative measures or by the order in which participants recalled experiences of safety or unsafety.

Second, although the sample included diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, it was predominantly White and relatively young. Consequently, the findings may not capture the experiences of multiply marginalised LGBTQ+ individuals.

Third, the study was not designed to examine differences across LGBTQ+ subgroups. Although participants shared several experiences, the meanings of social safety may vary across sexual and gender minoritised groups and should be examined directly in future research.

Finally, the model provides a psychological framework for understanding how queer social safety is constructed within a specific sociocultural context. It complements, rather than replaces, broader perspectives on related issues from sociology, sexuality studies, and queer geographies.

Implications for research, practice, and policy

Despite these limitations, the findings have implications for research, practice, and policy. First, they support conceptualising social safety as a meaningful dimension of LGBTQ+ experience. Although the present study identified several shared processes across participants' accounts, future research should examine how queer social safety may be differently experienced and constructed across LGBTQ+ subgroups and developmental periods.

The proposed conceptual model also offers a framework for future research. Longitudinal, mixed-methods, and quantitative studies should test how visibility management, social spaces, interpersonal relationships, and subjective appraisals interact in shaping queer social safety across sociocultural contexts and broader systems of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, social inequality, and urban-rural dynamics.

With respect to practice, interventions across educational, healthcare, workplace, and community settings should foster conditions that communicate recognition, legitimacy, and protection, enabling LGBTQ+ individuals to navigate visibility with greater agency. At the policy level, efforts should move beyond formal inclusion towards socially safe environments where diversity is actively recognised and affirmed.

Conclusions

The present study provides an empirically grounded conceptualisation of queer social safety based on LGBTQ+ individuals' lived experiences. The proposed model explains how relational, contextual, and identity-related experiences are psychologically integrated into appraisals of social safety and unsafety, shaping possibilities for authentic engagement. By foregrounding recognition as a key relational process through which belonging, legitimacy, and protection are experienced, the model offers a process-oriented perspective that complements minority stress approaches to LGBTQ+ health and well-being.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Cristiano Scandurra**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft; **Selene Mezzalana**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft; **Davide Rea**: Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Visualization; **Alessia Geremicca**: Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Visualization; **Gianluca Cruciani**: Investigation, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Nicola Carone**: Investigation, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Vincenzo Bochicchio**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

AI use

ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.5) was used solely for language editing and readability improvement. It was not used for data analysis, the interpretation of findings, or the development of scientific content. All substantive decisions were made by the authors.

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Data availability statement

The data and materials that support the findings of this study may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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