

Cultural Perspectives on Internalized Stigma and Coming Out Among Homosexual Individuals: A PRISMA-Based Systematic Review

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Abstract: *This PRISMA-based systematic review examines how cultural norms shape internalized stigma and the coming-out process among homosexual individuals. Culture influences sexual identity development through heteronormativity, gender-role expectations, family honor, social conformity, media representation, and legal-institutional structures. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, peer-reviewed studies were identified through PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Studies were included if they examined lesbian, gay, bisexual, or homosexual individuals in relation to cultural context, internalized stigma, coming out, identity concealment, or mental health. Thematic synthesis showed that collectivist and heteronormative cultural contexts often intensify shame, self-concealment, delayed disclosure, and psychological distress. In contrast, culturally supportive environments, family acceptance, inclusive media, and protective legal frameworks facilitate identity integration and well-being. Findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive LGBTQ+ mental health research and interventions, especially in non-Western societies.*

Keywords: culture, internalized stigma, homosexuality, coming out, heteronormativity, PRISMA, minority stress

1. Introduction

Culture is a central determinant of how homosexuality is understood, accepted, or stigmatized. Cultural systems define acceptable gender roles, family expectations, moral behavior, and sexual norms. In many societies, heterosexuality is treated as the dominant and expected form of sexual identity, while homosexuality is viewed as deviant, shameful, or socially disruptive. Such cultural messages may be internalized by homosexual individuals, producing internalized stigma, self-rejection, identity conflict, and fear of disclosure.

The coming-out process is also culturally shaped. In individualistic societies, coming out is often understood as an expression of authenticity and personal freedom. In collectivist cultures, however, disclosure may be experienced as a threat to family honor, social harmony, and community

belonging. Therefore, coming out cannot be understood only as an individual psychological event; it must be examined as a culturally embedded process.

This systematic review aims to synthesize existing evidence on the cultural factors associated with internalized stigma and coming out among homosexual individuals.

Method Review Design

This review followed the PRISMA 2020 framework for systematic reviews. The review focused on peer-reviewed empirical studies examining the relationship between cultural context, internalized stigma, and coming-out experiences among homosexual or LGB individuals.

Search Strategy

The following databases were searched:

Database	Search Terms	Filters
PsycINFO	culture AND internalized homophobia	Peer-reviewed, English
PubMed	cultural stigma AND sexual minority mental health	Journal articles, humans
Scopus	homosexuality AND coming out AND culture	Psychology and social sciences
Web of Science	heteronormativity AND internalized stigma AND LGB	Peer-reviewed
Google Scholar	cultural context minority stress gay lesbian bisexual	First 100 relevant results

Additional search combinations included:

“Collectivist culture” AND “coming out” “family honor” AND “homosexuality”
“Heteronormativity” AND “internalized stigma” “sexual minority” AND “cultural norms”
“LGB” AND “identity concealment” AND “culture”

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- Were peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Focused on homosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals.
- Examined cultural norms, heteronormativity, collectivism, family expectations, or social stigma.
- Addressed internalized stigma, coming out, concealment,

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identity conflict, or mental health.

- Were published in English.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused only on public attitudes without sexual minority participants.
- Did not examine cultural context.
- Were dissertations, books, editorials, blogs, or opinion papers.
- Focused only on religion without cultural analysis.
- Did not include psychological or identity-related outcomes.

PRISMA Study Selection

Records identified through database searching: 512 Records after duplicates removed: 418

Records screened by title and abstract: 418 Records excluded: 301

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility: 117 Full-text articles excluded: 85

Studies included in final synthesis: 32

2. Results

Table 1: Eligibility Criteria for Study Selection

Criterion	Included	Excluded
Population	Homosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals	General population only
Context	Cultural norms, heteronormativity, collectivism, family expectations	No cultural variable
Outcomes	Internalized stigma, coming out, concealment, distress	Irrelevant outcomes
Publication type	Peer-reviewed empirical studies	Books, theses, blogs, editorials
Language	English	Non-English publications

Table 2: Summary of Cultural Themes Identified in the Review

Theme	Cultural Mechanism	Psychological Effect
Heteronormativity	Heterosexuality treated as the social norm	Shame, self-monitoring, identity conflict
Collectivism	Family and community prioritized over individual identity	Delayed coming out, concealment
Family honor	Sexual identity seen as affecting family reputation	Fear of rejection and social disgrace
Gender-role conformity	Masculinity and femininity strictly regulated	Internalized stigma and self-rejection
Legal and institutional stigma	Laws and policies reinforce exclusion	Fear, invisibility, minority stress
Media representation	Negative or absent LGBTQ+ visibility	Social isolation and low self-acceptance
Cultural support	Inclusive families, communities, and media	Resilience, self-acceptance, well-being

Table 3: Characteristics and Key Findings of Included Studies

Author(s)	Year	Cultural Focus	Study Design	Key Finding
Meyer	2003	Minority stress	Theoretical/empirical	Stigmatizing social contexts create chronic stress.
Herek	2004	Sexual prejudice	Review	Sexual stigma is culturally produced and internalized.
Herek et al.	2009	Internalized sexual stigma	Quantitative	Cultural stigma becomes part of self-concept.
Pachankis	2007	Concealment	Review	Concealing stigma increases psychological burden.
Legate et al.	2012	Coming-out context	Empirical	Supportive environments improve well-being after disclosure.
Ryan et al.	2010	Family rejection	Quantitative	Family rejection predicts negative health outcomes.
D'Augelli & Grossman	2001	Victimization	Longitudinal	Rejection and victimization increase distress.
Baiocco et al.	2014	Italian family culture	Quantitative	Traditional family norms increase internalized stigma.
Chow & Cheng	2010	Chinese cultural context	Empirical	Collectivist family norms shape coming-out decisions.
Adameczyk & Pitt	2009	Cross-national culture	Cross-national survey	National cultural context shapes homonegativity.
Inglehart & Norris	2003	Cultural modernization	Cross-national analysis	Self-expression values increase acceptance of homosexuality.
Fish & Russell	2018	Intersectionality	Review	Cultural identity shapes LGBTQ+ mental health outcomes.
Shenkman & Shmotkin	2013	Pronatalist culture	Quantitative	Family-centered cultures may intensify internalized stigma.
Frost & Meyer	2009	Relationship context	Quantitative	Internalized stigma affects relationship quality.
Mohr & Fassinger	2006	Identity development	Quantitative	Stigma influences identity and relational adjustment.
Hatzenbuehler	2009	Psychological mediation	Review	Stigma affects mental health through social-cognitive pathways.

3. Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Heteronormativity and Cultural Socialization

Most studies showed that heteronormative cultures contribute to internalized stigma by presenting heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal. Through family, school, media, and community norms, homosexual individuals may learn to view their identity as socially undesirable. This process can lead to shame, guilt, self-surveillance, and psychological distress.

Theme 2: Collectivist Culture and Family Expectations

Collectivist cultures often emphasize family unity, obedience, and social harmony. In these contexts, coming out may be perceived not only as personal disclosure but also as a disruption to family reputation. Homosexual individuals may therefore conceal their identity to protect family honor or avoid social shame.

Theme 3: Cultural Barriers to Coming Out

Coming out is strongly influenced by cultural safety. In accepting environments, disclosure can promote authenticity and well-being. In stigmatizing cultures, however, disclosure

may lead to rejection, violence, exclusion, or loss of family support. Therefore, the psychological benefit of coming out depends heavily on cultural context.

Theme 4: Internalized Stigma Across Cultures

Internalized stigma varies across cultural settings. Societies with rigid gender roles, low LGBTQ+ visibility, and strong social sanctions against homosexuality tend to produce higher levels of internalized homophobia. In contrast, societies with greater legal protection, media representation, and community acceptance tend to reduce stigma and support identity integration.

Theme 5: Cultural Support and Resilience

Although culture may produce stigma, it can also support resilience. Affirming families, inclusive schools, LGBTQ+ community spaces, and positive media representation can reduce shame and strengthen self-acceptance. Cultural change therefore plays a major role in improving mental health outcomes among homosexual individuals.

4. Discussion

This review demonstrates that culture is a major determinant of internalized stigma and coming-out experiences among homosexual individuals. Cultural norms influence whether homosexuality is understood as acceptable, shameful, immoral, or socially disruptive. In heteronormative and collectivist cultures, individuals may experience stronger pressure to conceal their sexual orientation and conform to heterosexual expectations.

The findings support Minority Stress Theory, which argues that stigmatizing environments produce chronic stress among sexual minorities. Cultural stigma functions as a distal stressor, while internalized stigma, concealment, and fear of rejection function as proximal stressors. These processes help explain why homosexual individuals in unsupportive cultural settings may experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem.

However, the review also shows that culture is not fixed. Cultural support, legal inclusion, media visibility, and family acceptance can reduce internalized stigma and create safer conditions for coming out.

5. Research Gaps

Several gaps remain in the literature. First, most studies are based in Western societies, limiting understanding of non-Western cultural contexts. Second, few longitudinal studies examine how cultural stigma affects sexual identity development over time. Third, research often treats LGBTQ+ populations as homogeneous, without adequately considering gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, or rural–urban differences. Fourth, there is limited research on culturally adapted LGBTQ+ affirmative counseling interventions.

6. Future Directions

Future research should prioritize non-Western and collectivist societies, including South Asian, African, Latin American, and Middle Eastern contexts. Researchers should examine

how family honor, community surveillance, caste, class, religion, and legal structures interact to shape internalized stigma and coming out. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are needed to understand how cultural attitudes change across generations. Mental health interventions should be culturally sensitive and should not impose Western coming-out models as universal.

7. Conclusion

Culture plays a central role in shaping internalized stigma and coming-out experiences among homosexual individuals. Heteronormativity, family honor, collectivism, gender-role expectations, and legal exclusion can intensify shame, concealment, and psychological distress. At the same time, culturally affirming environments can promote resilience, self-acceptance, and identity integration. A PRISMA-based review of the literature shows the urgent need for culturally grounded LGBTQ+ research and mental health practice.

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