

Interaction with peers online: LGBTQIA+ individuals' information seeking and meaning-making during the life transitions of identity construction

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Abstract

People search for information and experiences and seek meaning as a common reaction to new life challenges. There is little knowledge about the interactions through which experiential information is acquired, and how such interactions are meaningful to an information seeker. Through a qualitative content analysis of 992 posts in an online forum, this study investigated lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual (LGBTQIA+) individuals' online information interactions and meaning-making with peers during their life transitions of identity construction. Our analysis reveals LGBTQIA+ people's life challenges across three transition stages (being aware of, exploring, and living with a new identity). Three main types of online peer interactions were identified within: cognitive, affective, and situational peer interactions. We found that online peer interactions are not only a type of information source that LGBTQIA+ individuals use to acquire understanding about themselves but a unique space for transformation learning and meaning-making where they share self-examination and reflection, conduct assessments and assumptions, and obtain strength and skills to initiate and adapt life transitions. The findings have theoretical contributions to the development of information behavior models of transitions and practical implications on providing information services that support LGBTQIA+ individuals' meaning-making during the life transition.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The experience of meaning is important for maintaining well-being (Wissing et al., 2021). People who are transitioning in life often search for meaning as a common reaction to new life challenges (Haimson et al., 2021; Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021; Ruthven, 2019, 2021a; Ruthven et al., 2018a). Information seeking and interactions are critical in supporting *meaning-making*, as people ask for explanations, seek solutions about life

changes, and search for understanding (Ruthven, 2019). People often interact with others with similar challenges and transitions to acquire information and support (Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021). These social interactions have been vitally valuable in providing information and as an effective means to form community belonging, especially for people reconstructing their identity and self-agency (McKenzie & Willson, 2019). In this study, we explore those interactions under a unique context, LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity transitions,

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where LGBTQIA+ individuals construct meanings of their sexual and gender identities.

Understanding one's sexual and gender identity and developing and maintaining meaningful relationships are crucial for experiencing a meaningful life (Lorraine, 2019; Ruthven, 2022; Wissing, 2014; Yarhouse & Tan, 2004). For sexual- and gender-marginalized communities, this process can be challenging. When LGBTQIA+ individuals discover their identities, they may experience reorientations resulting from a growing awareness that their assigned identities do not accurately reflect their experiences, and they desire to live their lives in a more meaningful manner (Huttunen et al., 2019; Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021; Ruthven, 2019). Such a reorientation may lead to potential challenges in life. For example, compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBTQIA+ individuals tend to report compromised psychosocial well-being, including obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Bostwick et al., 2014; Cicero et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). LGBTQIA+ individuals often face hostile environments created by heteronormative culture, which assumes that heterosexuality is the only natural and normal expression of sexuality (Mink et al., 2014). They often experience minority stress at multiple levels, such as internalized homophobia, violence, or harassment, triggered by sexual identity and legislation that targets gender and sexual diversity (Meyer, 2015). The negative health outcomes associated with identifying as LGBTQ+ are often socially created due to factors such as stigma, discrimination, and lack of acceptance (Nakkeeran & Nakkeeran, 2018). Meaning-making is commonly considered vital for adapting to stressful events and challenges (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Information needs in life transitions are believed to be distinct from everyday information needs (Westbrook, 2009). As shown in the information behavior theory of transitions (Ruthven, 2021a), individuals may need different informational support during different stages of transitions. An information-seeker's habitual information sources may not be relevant or accessible in a new challenging situation (McKenzie & Willson, 2019). For example, information about sexual and relational health is critical for sexual and gender-marginalized people to understand their bodies, identities, and relationships. However, such information is often limited and difficult to find (Delmonaco et al., 2020). Previously credible information sources, including family, friends, and authorities, might not be a safe place to obtain information support owing to the identity exposure-associated stigma and risks (Delmonaco et al., 2020; LaSala, 2000). As such, people usually struggle to access relevant information and support their gender and sexuality queries and concerns in the offline world. Consequently, they turn online and are inclined to seek help and support from peers sharing

similar situations on the Internet (Jia et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2014). In this study, peers specifically refer to people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Research has found that LGBTQIA+ people interact with their peers through online message boards and community forums to seek information and support (Delmonaco et al., 2020; Jia et al., 2021). Scholars from diverse disciplines have investigated LGBTQIA+ individuals' information-seeking and sharing on social media. It is found that identity and relationship related information from peers and their lived experiences are beneficial in exploring their own emerging sexual and gender minority identity (Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al., 2013). However, there is a lack of understanding of how they interact with peers in the online community and how such interactions contribute to the formation of their identity, that is, making meaning of the significant life transition and moving forward from this turbulent period of life.

Scholars in library and information science (LIS) have explored *meaning-making* as an information-seeking and interaction enterprise in different contexts such as health disruption (Genuis & Bronstein, 2017), migrant transition (Allard & Caidi, 2018) and transgender identity construction (Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021). These studies focus on information seekers to understand the meaning-making process of how individuals make sense of and use information in life transitions and the social processes involved. Although these studies highlight the importance of experiential information from others, little is known about the interactions through which experiential information is acquired, and how information from those interactions is meaningful to an information seeker.

Interactions with peers play a crucial role in meaning-making, from initial sources of definitional information to helping people learn the norms in a new community (McKenzie & Willson, 2019; Ruthven, 2019). We contend that interactions with peers should not be construed as an external part that either constrains or affords meaning making, but instead as an integral process where challenging situations are evaluated, and meanings are gained. This study focuses on LGBTQIA+ individuals' interactions with peers online to better understand how individuals use online interactions to change their perception of identities and situate themselves in the social life. Specifically, the study investigates how LGBTQIA+ individuals' interactions with peers in an online community support meaning-making during identity construction. It addresses two important research questions, namely:

RQ1. What are the life challenges, the stages, and the themes of meaning-making during LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity transitions as discussed in the online community?

RQ2. What are the types of interactions between LGBTQIA+ individuals with their peers and how do those interactions support their meaning-making during the identity transition?

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Meaning-making during life transitions

In the field of Psychology, *meaning-making* refers to one's effort to develop a new perception and understanding of a situation to examine why this happened and what impact it has had (Lichtenthal et al., 2010; Taylor, 1983). It is framed as a process that involves both cognitive and emotional processing, in which individuals rework their beliefs and explore their emotions (Park, 2010). Meaning-making is closely related to sense-making (Dervin, 1998), a more widely used term in LIS. Some researchers have tried to differentiate between sense-making and meaning-making processes, arguing that the former refers to seeking comprehensibility of information while the latter is more related to understanding the significance of information (Castelli Dransart, 2013). Focusing on the context of stressful life events, Park (2010) integrated both searching for comprehensibility and significance into her meaning-making framework which was developed by drawing on current theories of meaning-making from a variety of disciplines.

Meaning-making has been conceptualized as both conscious and unconscious coping activities (George et al., 2022; Park, 2010). In this study, we adopted Park's (2010) meaning-making framework to examine how sexual and gender-marginalized individuals seek and share information by interacting with peers online to understand their situation and the significance during identity transition. We focused on an individual's ability to develop agency in constructing their identity and adapting to related life transitions. We acknowledge that not all LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences shared in the online community are related to transitions and not all the online interactions can or should be framed as meaning-making. This article, however, adopts a transitional perspective and conceptualizes information seeking and sharing during peer interactions as a meaning-making process, which allows for a better understanding of the strength within the community and how LGBTQIA+ people use online spaces to establish safety and resilience and support each other.

Meaning-making is a common and vital reaction to significant life transitions (Nangia & Ruthven, 2022; Ruthven, 2019, 2021a, 2022). Scholars from various

disciplines have examined the meaning-making process across different contexts, including coping with significant life challenges, such as the loss of family members or illness (Courtenay et al., 1998; Stroebe & Schut, 2001), as well as exploring a new way of living due to a lack of meaning in life (Maurya et al., 2023; Straus, 1979). The identity construction of LGBTQIA+ individuals can be understood as a process involving both gradual self-exploration and life-changing events (e.g., gender transitioning). Information is critical for tackling these challenges and supporting meaning-making (Ruthven, 2021a).

LIS scholars have investigated how information interactions contribute to meaning-making, for example, Allard and Caidi (2018) posited a five-step translocal meaning-making model that explains how migrants interpret the information they encounter when they move to a new locale. Genuis and Bronstein (2017) examined perceptions of normality by studying how people came to terms with life-disrupting health challenges, and explained how normality was constructed while people interacted with others. Huttunen and Kortelainen (2021) studied the seeking of deeply meaningful information in the context of gender identity formation and found that peer communities were necessary for people to find safe places to share information and private experiences. Ruthven (2019) discussed how various forms of information can be used for meaning-making and called for the exploration of meaning-making as a new focus for information seeking and information interactions research. More recently, Ruthven (2021a) has proposed an information behavior theory of transitions based on the synthesis of existing theories to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of information in the transition process. The theory includes the initial and final points of transition (life before and after the transition), which is divided into the three main phases of understanding, negotiating, and resolving, and characterized by the psychological processes involved in transitions. There are specific transition processes that occur between the three main phases, and these are referred to as event, engaging, enacting, and establishing. The theory highlights the importance of informational support from experienced others across multiple phases.

Although extant studies highlight the importance of social context and experiential information from peers in meaning-making during life transitions, little insight has been offered about how individuals interact with each other and how these interactions contribute to meaning-making. While social interactions can be crucial in gaining information to navigate challenging situations (Veinot, 2007), it may be more difficult for LGBTQIA+ individuals to access and interact with others offline as their identities are systematically marginalized in social spaces (Dym et al., 2019; Mo & Coulson, 2013).

2.2 | LGBTQIA+ individuals' use of social media for identity development

In the Social Theory, *identity* refers to the distinguishing characteristics, values, attitudes, behaviors, physical features, and/or ways of communicating that define an individual or collective entity (Kivisto, 2020). According to Hicks (2020), scholars have adopted five distinct perspectives in their conceptualizations of identity in the information behavior literature, including identity as a personal project, identity and social groups, identity as self-presentation, fragmented discursive subjects, and intersectional, hybrid and global identities.

In this study, we conceptualize identity as a personal project, as we focus on the process where LGBTQIA+ individuals' personal experience of building and developing self-perception related to their sexuality and gender through online peer interactions. This conceptualization emphasizes the psychological origins of identity research, in which the comprehension of individual identity portrays it as a sequential journey that most individuals experience in their adolescence (Hicks, 2020). This is aligned with existing models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982) which focus on certain key tasks individuals undertook within distinct phases, leading to the formation of a well-adjusted sexual minority identity. Critics have raised concerns about the stage-based models of coming out due to their concentration on the individual and failure to address the socio-cultural surroundings in which people live (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Moreover, these phases are often analyzed solely within the realm of offline experiences, disregarding the influence of online spaces. In this study, we acknowledge the influence of online social engagement and cultural factors on the formation of an individual's identity.

LGBTQIA+ individuals of diverse sexual and gender identity as opposed to heterosexual and cisgender individuals (Shankle, 2013). LGBTQIA+ individuals are at risk for mental and physical health issues due to perceived stigma and psychopathology (Kaniuka et al., 2019). Social safety is of significance for individuals' social and psychological development. It encompasses fundamental human needs such as trustworthy social relationships, acceptance, and security, all of which can be threatened by the presence of social stigma (Diamond & Alley, 2022). Online resources, including social media, appear important for LGBTQIA+ individuals in building social connections and establishing social safety (Jia et al., 2021).

LGBTQIA+ individuals use various online resources, including social media, search engines, and health-related websites, to seek information and support (Jia et al., 2021). Motivated by cognitive needs, LGBTQIA+ individuals often

use search engines and health websites to seek factual and evidence-based information, including statistics on sexually transmitted infections and human immunodeficiency virus (DeHaan et al., 2013; Magee et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2016). Affect and emotion have also frequently been noted in affecting individuals' information seeking behavior (Kuhlthau, 2005; Nahl, 2005). Negative emotions can significantly motivate people to seek information (Dervin & Reinhard, 2007; Ruthven et al., 2018a, 2018b). According to the affective load theory (Nahl, 2005), individuals seek for support and help when their affective load rises above a specified level. Emotion has also been conceptualized as factors that influence the information source selection (Savolainen, 2019). Social media is frequently used by LGBTQIA+ individuals to seek emotional support and community connections, enabling LGBTQIA+ individuals to deal with social pressures (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Jia et al., 2021). According to Fischer et al. (2004), not only does our own emotions influence others, but the emotions of others also affect our own feelings. By asking and providing emotional support to each other, LGBTQIA+ individuals gain a sense of community belonging. In this study, we use affective interactions to describe individuals' emotional reactions to indicate their emotions or emotional status expressed in the online posts.

Social media is also used to seek information about lived experiences, such as identity confusion, sex, romance, relationships, and gender transitions (Dym et al., 2019; Flanders et al., 2017; Kitzie, 2019). Researchers have examined how LGBTQIA+ individuals leverage social media for identity construction. For instance, Haimson et al. (2015) examined transgender people's use of Facebook during gender transitions. They suggested that Facebook is not only a site of support but stress owing to family-and friends-related transition disclosure difficulties. Blogs have also been used for self-documentation, expressive, and therapeutic writing by transgender people for transition purposes (Haimson, 2018). Green et al. (2015) explored how the LGBT community and its allies utilized YouTube to disclose information about LGBT bullying. Kitzie (2015) examined how the social Q&A site Yahoo! Answers was used by individuals to understand LGBT identities and identified five themes that characterized information shared within the threads, including defining an LGBT identity, romance, sex and relationships, marginalizing others, coming out, and functioning as a community. Recently, Dym et al. (2019) found that LGBTQ+ individuals built support structures by constructing community narratives to guide self-exploration and recovery in online fandom communities. Kitzie (2019) further examined how search engines and social networking sites enabled and constrained

LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity information practices. These findings indicate that LGBTQIA+ individuals are experienced in adapting social technologies to engage information associated with identity development. However, most of these studies focus on individuals' practices rather than interactions between peers on social platforms.

LGBTQIA+-specific sites and applications (apps) are also designed to build connections and offer support or visibility. For example, the LGBTQ-specific social networking site TrevorSpace is designed to support LGBTQ youth struggling with depression and mental health challenges (Lytle et al., 2018). Scholars have also found that geosocial networking apps create a sense of community, enabling people to construct and develop their identities and establish relationships with others (Dodge, 2014). For example, Grindr was used by gay and bisexual men to (re)construct their identity and enhance self-efficacy (Jaspal, 2017). Castañeda (2015) discovered young Filipino gay men used Grindr to develop and explore their identity by sharing personal stories with other gay men. Castañeda referred to the socialization process as “learn [ing] how to be gay” (p. 29).

Most studies on LGBTQIA+ individuals' social media use gathered data through interviews or surveys (Craig, Eaton, et al., 2021; Dym et al., 2019). Kitzie (2015) examined “best answer” pairs from the LGBT thread of Yahoo! Answers, a heteronormative and essentialist context. To date, few studies have investigated written communications in LGBTQIA+-centered online communities. Existing studies show that social media can provide much-needed support in building peer connections and self-exploration. However, these studies focused more on how LGBTQIA+ individuals use social media and its associated impact and provided a limited understanding of the dynamics of peer interactions in online spaces. Since online interactions are significant, more studies are needed to investigate how individuals seek meaning and how a new understanding is formed through online peer interactions in supporting adaption to life transitions. This study attempts to investigate the interaction patterns of LGBTQIA+ individuals in an online community.

3 | METHOD

This study adopted a constructivist approach. The aim of the constructivist paradigm is to understand the multi-aspects of human behavior (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which aligns with the objectives of this study. Within the constructivist paradigm, the researchers interpret reality through the perspective of the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). The researchers are outsiders of the LGBTQIA+ online

community being studied. Instead of considering themselves as knowledgeable of others' experience, the researchers positioned themselves as active listeners and empowered participants as experts in telling their own stories. The role of the researchers is to uncover the inner perspectives on social phenomena from the study participants, thus providing valuable insights into social knowledge (Wahyuni, 2012).

3.1 | Data collection

As the focus of this study is LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity transition and peer interactions, we decided to choose a platform that should be LGBTQIA+ centered and support anonymous online interactions which is helpful and less risky for individuals undergoing a transition (Yao et al., 2023). We investigated several forums and selected LGBT Chat and Forums (<https://lgbtchat.net/>) for this purpose. Different from social media that encourage interactions between people who are connected in the physical world, the platform of LGBT Chat and Forums does not require members to disclose their real identity to network and share their personal identity related experiences with peers. Historical data from the site have been used to identify discussions related to information and help-seeking behavior (Liang et al., 2019). At the time of data collection, the LGBT Chat & Forums was an active open-registration and anonymized international forum with 47,200 active members and 82,463 discussions. Our sample in general represents the Western approach toward gender and sexuality, which is shaped by cultural norms, religious beliefs, historical contexts, and philosophical perspectives prevalent in Western civilizations. Although there were several posters indicated that they were of Asian ethnicity, most posters seem to be from Western countries. All the posts were written in English. For unknown reasons, the site has no longer been active since early 2021.

We collected one-month forum data, including 158 threads containing 996 posts, from the LGBT Chat & Forums between March 21 and April 21, 2020. The time period was chosen as it was the most recent data at the time of data collection. LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity construction is impacted by social and cultural factors and can change rapidly with time especially in the online environments (Hurd et al., 2020). Collecting the most recent posts available allow us to gain insights into current events and ongoing conversations in the forum.

While there were multiple sub-forums on the site, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender labeled forums had the most posts. It was noted that members' identities were not strictly aligned with the forum labels.

We eliminated two threads (four posts) where the initial posters clearly stated they were not LGBT themselves. For example, one poster used the platform to ask questions for a client and another person posted a study survey targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals. The final dataset and thread and post distributions are presented in Table 1. The number of posts in each thread varied from 1 to 32. Fifteen threads had only one initial post without responses. Posters were distinguished between thread hosts/members and other members to identify patterns of interactions. Posts from other members are referred to as response posts.

In accordance with the ethical standards for collecting online data, forums were considered to be “public spaces” and did not require registration to view (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). The first author submitted the Human Ethics Application (Protocol ID: 203076) to the University Human Research Ethics Committee which was considered exempt as the review outcome in April 2020, given the low risk associated with the research project. In addition, we adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) in our data collection and analysis (Ess & Jones, 2004). Specifically, to protect the posters' privacy and anonymity, we did not collect user IDs during the data collection. Moreover, all the quotes from the posters were paraphrased instead of presenting them verbatim in the results reporting to minimize any potential harm or discomfort that may have resulted from the data collected in this study. We also avoided assigning gendered pronouns to posters; for those who did not clearly share their gender information, we simply referred to them as “the poster.”

3.2 | Data analysis

Focusing on the social-cultural context, we developed the coding scheme of life challenges and interactions during LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity construction. The scheme emerged gradually from the data and was inductively developed. The first author created the draft coding scheme; the difficult and ambiguous codes were

discussed with co-authors in multiple rounds of team meetings. In addition, the second author coded a randomly selected 10% of the posts. We employed Cohen's Kappa (McHugh, 2012) to test intercoder reliability and the score was 0.89. The findings were analyzed with respect to the coding scheme.

All posts were labeled according to the data structure, starting with the forum label, followed by the numbering of threads and responses. For example, L1 represents the thread host's first post (also referred to as the initial post) in the first thread in the lesbian forum, L1-1 refers to the first response to the initial post; G1 represents the thread host's first post in the first thread in the gay forum. For description purposes, the label also refers to the post author; for example, L1 represents the host of the first thread in the lesbian forum. The data were imported into NVivo for analysis. Using an inductive approach, each thread in the online forum was analyzed as described in the following sections.

The life challenge categories were developed to reflect meaning-making topics and associated emotions were analyzed as individuals developed their identities. Each thread was the unit of analysis. Axial coding was conducted using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

During the open coding, data were closely examined to identify different emotions, topics, and statements that emerged in a post to develop first-order concepts. For example, some threads primarily discussed confusion and uncertainty when posters discovered a new identity (identity confusion). In contrast, other threads seemed to focus on practical issues about transitions (transition practices). Each thread was coded with more than one challenge as expressed (for example, one may have identity confusion but does not want others to find out at the same time). Axial coding was used to compare and contrast first-order concepts. As a result of the comparison, second-order themes emerged around awareness of identity, exploring the new identity, and living with the new identity. In addition, the emotions expressed in the posts related to challenges were coded to understand better the context of posters' emotion processing.

Extant meaning-making related models (e.g., Park's meaning-making model and Allard and Caidi's translocal meaning-making model, as reviewed) guided the analysis of the coding of meaning-making interactions. Each of the 156 threads was coded as a unit to maintain contextual consistency across the interactions. The threads were read several times to capture the nuances. Another round of open and axial coding was conducted to identify patterns of meaning-making interactions. Emergent coding was continued until no new codes surfaced. The constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) defined the

TABLE 1 Final dataset for analysis.

Forum	No. of thread	No. of post (host's post + responding post)
Lesbian (L)	48	372
Gay (G)	19	97
Bisexual (B)	43	267
Transgender (T)	46	256
Total	156	992

emergent codes. Cross-references were used as required. The development continued until no new codes emerged, and no changes were needed. All the codes were fully exemplified.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Meaning-making themes during LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity transitions

Table 2 shows the major themes of life challenges, along with the subcodes that arose from the analysis of the forum dataset. Different life challenges can be seen across the three stages of identity construction as being aware of, exploring, and living with a new identity.

The awareness stage indicates individuals' sense-making on challenges in terms of understanding sexual and gender identity. The main challenges at this stage included being confused about identity understanding and inability to interpret embodied feelings and desires. The stage of exploring a new identity reflects posters' desire to initiate new identity construction and explore ways to live differently with the new identity. At this stage, questions about the social aspects of identity and identity practice were raised, such as sexual and gender transition practices, norms within and outside the community, and the social consequences of living with marginalized identity. Challenges in living with a new identity stage are concerned with further adaptation to society. People usually dealt with non-heteronormative

relationships, social judgments, and expectations and attempted to build community connections.

As discussed earlier, negative emotions can serve as powerful motivators, driving individuals to actively seek out information (Dervin & Reinhard, 2007; Ruthven et al., 2018a, 2018b). Notably, negative emotions related to the challenges were frequently expressed in posts across all three stages, commonly demonstrated as fear, uncertainty, and sadness (Table 3).

4.2 | Online interactions during meaning-making of identity transition challenges

The analysis reveals the three main types of interactions that occurred in cognitive, affective, and situational meaning-making. Various types of information were sought and shared during these interactions. The following sections describe in detail the characteristics of each type of interaction:

4.2.1 | Cognitive interactions in meaning-making

Cognitive interactions during LGBTQIA+ individuals' information-seeking and sharing in the online community refer to the efforts of seeking understanding or helping others to understand and make sense of the incidents/events they are facing and how to respond. Seventy-five

TABLE 2 Meaning-making themes during LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity transitions.

Transition stage	Themes of life challenges	Description
Stage 1. Being aware of a new identity	Identity confusion	Uncertainty about having non-normative sexual and gender identity
	Understanding body and desire	Confusion about feelings related to sexual desire and body
Stage 2. Exploring a new identity	Sexual practice	Actions related to difficulties learning and practice non-normative sexual behavior
	Coming out	Difficulties related to sharing a new identity with others
	Transition practice	Changing one's gender presentation or sex characteristics
	Risk/consequence of being LGBT	Potential risks and challenges the life transitions may bring
	Community norms	Requirements of being LGBTQIA+, norms and rules within the new community (LGBT community)
	Social norms	Conflicts related to norms and standards in the heterosexual society
Stage 3. Living with a new identity	Dating	Issues around how to find a partner and dating techniques
	Relationship issues	Conflicts in relationships
	Social judgment	Live with the judgment of others during life transitions
	Community connection	Difficulties related to finding a new community and build connections
	Life goals	Pessimistic vision about living with a non-normative identity

TABLE 3 Emotions expressed during LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity transitions.

Transition stage	Main emotion categories	Expressions in the posts
Stage 1. Being aware of a new identity	Fear	Anxious, scared, worry, terrified, fear, insecure, nervous, stuck
	Anger	Annoying
	Sadness	Depressed (2)
	Uncertainty	Confused (2), conflicted (2), unsure
	Embodied feelings	Aroused, uncomfortable
Stage 2. Exploring a new identity	Fear	Afraid, anxiety, scared, upset, worry
	Uncertainty	Bugging
	Sadness	Depressed, feel a loss, alone
	Shame	Embarrassed, awkward
	Embodied feelings	Horny
Stage 3. Living with a new identity	Fear	Nervous, overwhelming, panic, scary, stressful
	Uncertainty	Confused
	Sadness	Depressed, lonely, frustrated
	Boredom	Bored

percent of posts contained cognitive information. As shown in Table 4, seven specific types of cognitive interactions in the hosts' posts and five in responding posts were identified. Individuals frequently shared cognitively processed information, including self-reflections, practical information, subjective opinions, facts, and knowledge.

LGBTQIA+ posters described their situation in detail to assess the severity of the challenge they were facing by asking for information about causes, comparative information, and consequences through cognitive information posting. The analysis indicates that cognitive postings during meaning-making varied in the three stages of adaptation to the new identity.

To understand their bodies and desires during the early stage of being aware of identity (Stage 1), they asked experienced members to share information related to the explanation and confirmation of their identity. For example, after sharing the specific incidents that triggered the inquiry, one poster wrote,

I feel so confused about the meaning of these two events and I'm trying to figure out if they mean anything, so I can move on with my life without worrying that I might be bisexual and not realize it until much later.

(B11)

In the stage of actively exploring the new identity (Stage 2), LGBTQIA+ individuals asked for opinions on the new rules and norms within the communities and suggestions on identity practice, such as the use of labels, decisions about coming out, and transition tips, which are likely to trigger behavioral changes to accommodate life transitions.

When they pictured themselves living with the new or already living with the identity (Stage 3), LGBTQIA+ individuals asked for suggestions on relationship issues, managing social judgment, and building new connections. During the first two stages, individuals experienced intense conflicts, and shared mostly self-observations and reflections. They shared more observations of others and a broad social environment when they tried to adapt to the new identity. Conflicts usually trigger individuals' reflective attempts to find the meaning of an event (Azmitia, 2002). One member (L17) described how it was like to fall in love with another person after two years of being in an abusive relationship and asked,

In the past two years, I feel like I have lost touch with myself, and I really want to find my way back. I worry that this makes me a bad person. I used to tell my ex that I would never leave her for another person, and although I haven't technically done that, I still feel guilty about it.

(L17)

These thoughtful reflections involve reappraisal and comparison between one's experiences and beliefs. The post reflects the posters' efforts to modify the understanding of their external and internal worlds.

As demonstrated in the responding posts, which was written in response to the hosts' cognitive postings, peers in the communities shared their knowledge and understanding of gender and sexual identity to fill others' cognitive gaps, understand others' confusion about their identity, and minimize uncertainty. For example, in response to identity confusion, B14-2 shared,

You might have heard this already, but I truly believe that sexuality can be fluid. Even for someone who identifies as completely heterosexual, I imagine there may have been

TABLE 4 Cognitive interactions with peers.

Thread	The function of the interaction	Description
Host's post	Asking for confirmation	Asking for others' evaluation of a situation to initiate a life transition
	Asking for opinions or insights	Asking for explanations or interpretations to make sense of a situation
	Asking for practical information	Asking for information and suggestions on actions to activate life transitions
	Asking for advice and guidance	Requesting for advice on adaption and guidance to move forward
	Sharing self-examination and self-reflection	Examining one's thoughts on a situation
	Sharing practical information	Providing behavioral suggestions based on own experience
	Sharing identity practice progress or life journey	Sharing details or milestones during adaption
Responding post	Appraising or analyzing the situation	Reassessing or redefining the situations of others and providing interpretations and explanations.
	Sharing opinions, insights, and belief	Individuals sharing their subjective position on a situation or topic
	Sharing facts or knowledge	Sharing facts or knowledge to support a statement
	Providing advice and guidance	Providing suggestions or guidance for initiating transitions in life
	Encouraging self-reflection	Asking the questioner self-reflective questions

a point in their life where they wondered what it would be like to be attracted to someone of the same gender.

(B14-2)

Knowledge from those who are experienced enables new members to update their understanding and, consequently, the meaning of their experiences. Meaning-making involves searching for a more acceptable interpretation of a situation that leads to a more optimistic prediction of the future (Park, 2010). In response to L17, L17-1 wrote,

Don't beat yourself up for having feelings for someone else, even if it happened while you were in the middle of a breakup. It's not uncommon for people to develop feelings unexpectedly, even when they're not planning on breaking up. I also have a hunch that maybe the reason your feelings for this new person are so intense is because of the abuse you went through with your ex.

(L17-1)

In addition to context-specific analysis, meaningful interpretations also included general insights shared by others. For example, in response to L14's inquiry about relationship problems, L14-1 shared her value on love and relationship, "Love and life have no handbooks. There are no guarantees in life, but you cannot love if

you do not give love." While context analysis is essential, insights or value sharing can enable a more coherent and meaningful understanding of oneself, which might be reflected upon and transformed over time.

To offer explanations and suggestions on the uncertainty of identity and complex relationship issues, members reappraised the meaning of the event based on their beliefs, views, and experiences as well as the meaning they gleaned from their own. The reassessment or redefinition of situations often made people feel more positive or revealed potentially helpful new information. Moreover, peers in the community provided actionable advice on how to adapt to identity-related life transitions, including context-specific guidance and general advice. For example, in responding to B15's post asking for advice on exploring identity possibilities when just starting college, B15-2 wrote,

College is an awesome opportunity to start fresh with a totally clean slate. Nobody there knows anything about you, so you can really be whoever you want to be. If you're thinking about experimenting with guys, this is the perfect time to try it out. I'm pretty sure there will be some cool LGBTQ clubs and groups on campus where you can meet new people. And don't forget about dating apps! They can be a great way to find potential partners. So, if you want to explore this side of yourself, there are definitely some steps

you can take to make it a positive experience without anyone giving you crap for it.

(B15-2)

4.2.2 | Affective interactions in meaning-making

Meaning-making is often accompanied by strong emotions (Cox & McAdams, 2014; Gross & Feldman Barrett, 2011). Affective content can be found frequently both in the hosts' and responding posts. Fifty-eight percent of the posts contained affective narratives. As reported earlier, the narratives were emotionally rooted explanations of the questioners' lived experiences. In addition, affective interactions reflect the posters' efforts to seek emotional support and response to those requests. Four specific types of affective peer interactions in hosts' posts and seven in responding posts were clustered, as shown in Table 5. Information shared during this type of interaction mainly include one's emotion status, emotional needs, validation, resonance, reassurance, and other emotional support related information. These types of information contribute significantly to meaning-making. Resonance, for example, has the potential to enhance and magnify certain meanings or interpretations selectively, as it amplifies particular "signals" above others (Ruthven, 2021b).

As individuals could not understand their identity and could not predict the consequence of discovering a new identity, confusion and worry were the most frequently expressed emotions during the stage of identity awareness (Stage 1). Being eager to understand their

feelings and relieve confusion and fear, individuals shared their emotions and asked for resonance in the online forum. For example, T8, who was questioning his gender identity, wrote,

I am seriously questioning everything I thought I knew and it's got me totally confused. If I can't figure this out on my own, maybe someone else out there can relate to what I'm going through. It would be awesome to know that I'm not alone in this, you know? A little bit of reassurance would go a long way right now.

(T8)

Acknowledging one's feelings and seeking reassurance evokes LGBTQIA+ individuals to seek new information and mental evidence to construct meanings and acceptable interpretations for a potential new life.

While the cognitively structured questions posited the community or society's rules as central, the affective narratives posited the questioners' private lives as central to decision-making, who searched for explanations in the online forum and initiated potential life transitions. These personal narratives often incorporate detailed self-exposure, such as sexual desire, body image reflection, and personal experiences. As B2 talked about his sexual identity,

So, I still think women are gorgeous and sex with them is great, but I can't ignore these other feelings I've had buried inside me for so long. Lately, I've been getting more and

TABLE 5 Affective interactions with peers.

Thread	The function of the interaction	Description
Host's post	Asking for resonance	Asking for others' shared feelings to normalize life transitions
	Sharing emotions	Sharing one's emotional state during life transitions
	Sharing embodied feelings	Sharing feelings related to one's body and desire
	Seeking connections and belongingness	Expressing the wish to initiate new connections with others and join the new community
Responding post	Showing empathy and sympathy	Expressing understanding of others' emotions and feelings of pity, sorrow, and concern for others
	Providing validation	Confirming others' opinions and feelings
	Sharing resonance	Expressing shared emotions, opinions, and beliefs with others
	Providing reassurance of worth	Recognizing and valuing others for what they do and what they are. Esteem support
	Providing community belongingness	Showing support as a community
	Showing presences	Offering help and support
	Expressing encouragement	Giving hope and confidence

more attracted to good-looking guys, and the idea of kissing a guy actually turns me on instead of grossing me out. It's like, maybe now is the time to finally explore these other desires I've been keeping hidden for so long.

(B2)

Moreover, affection was commonly observed in the stage of exploring a new identity (Stage 2). Individuals identified new challenges and problems by sharing embodied feelings after sexual or transitional practices. Embodied feelings could motivate individuals to search for meaning and make behavioral changes to live a different life. For example, describing embodied feelings about being satisfied about their appearance, T46 posted,

I took a couple of pictures of myself this morning and I thought wow jeez, I really could pass (I've been referenced to as a male multiple times in my life, more than I have female probably, ha!) But I don't know, I guess I'm just looking for some guidance. When I get paid, I'm going to make the first steps of ordering a binder and some boxers/briefs.

(T46)

At the stage of living with identity (Stage 3), LGBTQIA+ individuals frequently experienced conflicts with others while engaging in active identity practice and relationship building. Because of being stressed, panicked, upset, and sad, they actively sought emotional support in the online forum to adapt to the consequences of their life transitions. Having lived a married life with a wife and children for more than 20 years, T17 had a conversation with his wife and “the dam broke,”

Yesterday was rough. It was time to have the talk I've been dreading for so long, and it was brutal. I know I hurt her a lot, but deep down, I think we both knew it was coming. I don't even know what I want to hear right now, maybe just a little reassurance that I'm not some kind of evil monster or something.

(T17)

LGBTQIA+ individuals' heavy affective load expressed in the questions often leads answerers to express emotional support. Affective content was found in 56% of answers. Interestingly, whether or not the questioner was seeking emotional support, the answers were rich in empathy. For example, in response to a depressed questioner, one member (T39-6) wrote,

Please stop hurting yourself. I totally get that you're going through some tough stuff and feeling alone in it, but trust me, I've been there too and it's a pretty dark place. But here's the thing: you're not alone. There are people out there who can relate and who want to support you. Don't be afraid to reach out and talk to someone, okay?

(T39-6)

Information provided while considering others' emotional states is associated with one's ability to take in and process information. Online forum community members frequently expressed sympathy, concern, and care in their messages to support others' emotional processing during their meaning-making, as illustrated in the following quote,

Just wanted to let you know that if you need anything at all, I'm here for you. I've been through some tough stuff myself, and I know how important it is to have someone you can rely on during those times. So if there's anything you need, just say the word.

(L5-4)

The responses that expressed reassurance and encouragement conveyed positive assessments of initial posters and their capabilities, which may potentially help reduce their shame or guilt of being LGBTQIA+. For example, one post (B15-4) encouraged another member: “You need to realize that you are a unique, important, and precious part of this world and your presence in it enriches the lives of all those you interact with.” Validation and reassurance messages acknowledged agreement or emphasized similar views and feelings toward others to make them feel “you are not alone.” For example, one member (G3-4) discussed identity confusion,

I just want to remind you that you're still young and it's completely okay to have these feelings and not be sure of your identity. It's natural to want to experiment and try new things. And just so you know, you're not alone in feeling this way—it's actually a pretty common experience.

(G3-4)

4.2.3 | Situational interactions in meaning-making

Situational interactions in meaning-making are associated with individuals' attempts to seek or share detailed

and contextual information about life experiences to validate potential life transitions and make sense of life challenges. During the situational interactions, situational meaning, the meaning in the context of a particular environmental encounter can be obtained (Park, 2010). The process involves interpreting the significance of the event, appraising its meaning, deciding on the appropriate response, and experiencing the emotional state associated with the outcome (Park, 2010). Situational information was shared in 44% of the posts. Two specific types of situational peer interaction in hosts' posts and two in responding posts were identified (Table 6). Information shared during this type of interactions mainly include contextual information and lived experience.

Detailed narrative descriptions of problematic situations were common across all three stages of LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity construction. Such descriptions were related to physical, social, and cultural aspects in the context of information seeking and sharing. For example, when asking for suggestions on coming out, B10 provided detailed background information regarding the situation. The narrative description highlights the intersectionality of the poster's identity, revealing the intricate interplay between their LGBTQIA+ identity, cultural background, and family dynamics. The individual's experience reflects the complexities that arise when multiple aspects of identity intersect:

I just moved in January, and it's been a bit of a culture shock. The school I go to is way bigger than my old one, and I haven't met any LGBTQ+ people to talk to. It's a bit worrying because I'm Indian, and while my mother's part of India is pretty accepting of LGBTQ+ people, my dad's region is more traditional and only recognizes marriage between a man and a woman. I'm afraid that if I come out as gay, I'll be shunned.

(B10)

Descriptions were especially rich in posts that sought situational meaning, often triggered by an environmental

encounter or a potentially stressful event. How the situation was developed was shared, along with assigning meaning to the situation and seeking solutions to challenges. Without an explicit request, these posts were often long and asked for others' appraisals of their environmental encounters. For example, B11 tried to figure out what happened in her life making her question her sexuality; the poster started by explaining related experience in the past,

So, these two things that happened in my life really messed with my head about my sexuality. The first thing was when I was 16, and I was in a really bad place mentally because had been raped the summer before my junior year. After that, all of my relationships were a disaster, and to make matters worse, I was bullied all throughout that year. I just want to know what these things mean, if anything at all. It's been so confusing, and I really just want to figure it out so that I can move forward with my life and not have to worry about suddenly realizing I'm bi when I'm, like, 40 or something.

(B11)

To provide suggestions tailored to the questioners' needs and situation, the community members showed genuine interest in their situation and asked for more details. For example, helping a member make sense of her relationship break-up, they asked, "*Do you often text since you broke up?*" "*First of all, is this a long distance relationship? Does this relationship only depend on calling each other?*"

LGBTQIA+ individuals frequently asked for lived experiences from other members to predict changes during the new adaptation and move forward with transitions. For example, T18, who was planning to start hormone therapy asked,

I'm curious about how hormones might affect my body hair. Did you have a lot of

TABLE 6 Situational interaction with peers.

Thread	The function of the interaction	Description
Host's post	Sharing contextual information	Explaining a situation to support the inquiry
	Asking for shared experience	Asking for others' experience to normalize life transitions or to predict changes associated with the new adaptation
	Asking for more contextual details	Questioners asking for more details about the situation described in the answer post
Responding post	Sharing lived experience	Sharing detailed context-related personal experience
	Asking for more contextual details	Members asking for more details about a situation

body hair before starting hormone therapy? And what kind of changes did you notice in your hair growth afterwards? I'm thinking about doing laser hair removal for my beard, since it's a big issue for me. But I'm wondering if I'll need to do anything else with laser or if regular shaving and waxing will suffice.

(T18)

Contextual information was also shared while validating and encouraging others. Sharing on their lived experiences, which were highly relevant to the situation, helped LGBTQIA+ individuals who were experiencing life transitions build new knowledge and understanding, which may potentially influence their appraised meaning of a situation or their global belief in identity. For example, to answer L30's identity confusion question, members shared their own experiences,

I totally get it—I've had a tough time figuring out my own sexuality too. Initially, I thought I was Bi, then I considered being Poly, but now I know I'm Pan. I guess there's a chance I might look back and realize I'm something else in the future. When I came out for the third time, my pals were like, "Wow, your sexuality changes a ton!" At first, I felt pretty down about it, but then I came to understand that sexuality can be super fluid and tends to evolve.

(L30-1)

5 | DISCUSSION

This study examined LGBTQIA+ individuals' online interactions with peers in an LGBT-specific forum during their transition of meaning-making in identity construction. Posters often described they experienced isolation and loneliness due to a lack of trustworthy information resources offline. Through social media affordances such as anonymity, openness, and interactivity, the online forum provided a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals to interact with each other and provide meaning-making support to help each other cope life challenges and isolated and emotional situations.

5.1 | LGBTQIA+ information and peer interaction model in meaning-making

Based on the empirical findings, an integrated information and peer interaction model was developed

(Figure 1). LGBTQIA+ online community members' interactions were clustered into three categories: cognitive, affective, and situational. Cognitive interactions are the most common type of interaction demonstrated in online forums. Cognitive posts reflect posters' states of uncertainty and seek knowledge of the transitions they are experiencing. The problematic situations described by question posters are assessed, redefined, or even predicted by experienced forum members. Affective expressions are especially rich in answer posts, where question posters' negative feelings and emotions resonate and are validated. Situational interactions are often combined with other types of interactions, where the details of people's stories are shared, and in-depth conversations occur. The information shared during different types of interaction is different. The information individuals frequently shared during cognitive interaction are self-reflections, practical information, subjective opinions, facts, and knowledge. During affective interactions, information shared mainly is associated with one's emotion status, emotional needs, validation, resonance, reassurance, and other emotional support related information, while contextual information and lived experience are shared during situational interaction. The meaning-making process is not linear but a recursive, evolving, and spiraling process. As reported in the findings, it is clear that all three types of interactions occur in the three stages of transitions. Further, the three interactions are inter-responsive; for example, affective interactions can be seen in

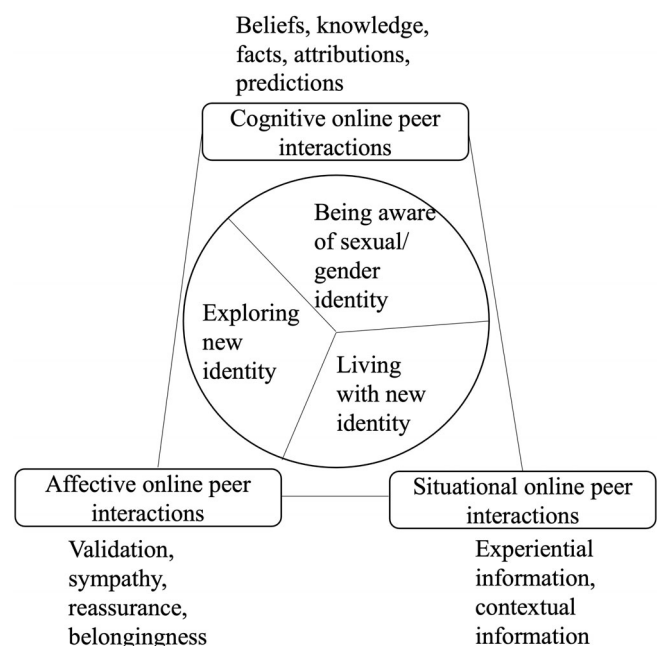


FIGURE 1 LGBTQIA+ information and peer interaction model.

response to an affective, cognitive, or situational posting. A post often includes multiple types of interaction.

5.2 | Cognitive processing in the interactions

Almost all posts were about the challenges and involved meaning-making during the life transition. Posters' awareness of their sexual and gender-diverse identities results in their exploration of another way of living. They connect with people who share the same experience and initiate changes to live different lives. Park's work on meaning-making states that people have developed global meaning systems that include beliefs, goals, and a subjective sense of purpose that give them orientation in the world and are used to make meaning in their lives (Park, 2010). A chain of meaning-making behaviors is activated to restore and rebuild people's sense of meaningfulness when their global meaning systems are challenged by perceived dissonance from the external world (Park, 2010). Our data vividly show that sexual and gender-marginalized individuals' global meaning systems are challenged in all three stages of their transitions, such as beliefs regarding sexual identity, social norms, and life goals. Sometimes, the posters directly express their concerns about global meaning (e.g., what life would look like for a lesbian). Often, the meaning-making is triggered by the posters' gradual awakening, the perceived risk of living with a non-normative identity, or a particular environmental encounter (situational meaning-making), such as a romantic encounter, conflicts with families, and harassment experience.

Meaning-making behaviors that contribute to restoring the meaning system entail changing the situational appraised meaning to be more consistent with existing global meaning, which is the assimilation process (Neto et al., 2011). It also involves the accommodation process of changing global beliefs to adjust to reality (Joseph & Linley, 2005). We found that forum interactions can contribute to both assimilation and accommodation processes. Answer posters actively provide explanations and interpretations to reappraise the meaning of a situation that causes stress in the poster's life. Experienced members who have achieved similar transitions share different perspectives, worldviews, and global beliefs, which might lead others to restore or change their global meaning systems.

5.3 | Emotional processing in the interactions

Meaning-making requires both cognitive and emotional processing (Hunt et al., 2007). Emotions are aroused

when people's existing beliefs and assumptions are challenged. Our data indicate that emotional and cognitive engagements with others are central to constructing new meanings for challenges. Being emotionally supported during a life transition is vital for gaining meaningfulness (Naveh & Bronstein, 2019; Peters et al., 2016). Most emotions expressed by question posters are negative ones. These emotions can significantly motivate meaning-making attempts. As explained in Nahl's affective load theory, individuals' sense of safety increases and their fear and anxiety are minimized when they seek help and information from anonymous experts (Nahl, 2005). Emotions are essential for building social relationships. As Fischer et al. (2004) explained in the study on emotional assimilation, others' emotions make a difference in how we feel. Through affective interactions with other members, posters may gain confidence and reassurance to move forward in their real lives. As shown in existing studies, disclosing one's identity was associated with more improvements in mental health and well-being in supportive environments (Legate et al., 2012). LGBTQIA + online emotional support interventions are associated with reduced depression and improved appraisal of stress as a challenge (Craig, Leung, et al., 2021).

5.4 | Situational interactions and meaning-making

Furthermore, the findings suggest that situational interaction is integral to meaning-making in this online community, where members share rich contextual and experiential information. Situational interactions are closely related to Ruthven's concept of situational needs, where posters often seem to be "thinking their way through a problem or hoping that someone else can turn their situation into a question that can be answered" (Ruthven et al., 2018b, p. 4). To provide information and solutions to the questioners' problems and feelings, forum members showed their curiosity and consideration for the specific situation described and asked for more details that they believed would be critical for solving the problem. Meaning does not easily occur. The meaning was constructed through extensive situational interactions in which highly relevant information is exchanged. LGBTQIA+ individuals were also found to seek information from others who had experienced similar issues. The answers are also rich in narrative descriptions of personal experiences that the poster believes might resonate with the questioner. Those interactions can be more meaningful and significant in assisting people to cope with their transitions and manage their related stress (Davison et al., 2000).

5.5 | Theoretical contributions

By identifying the meaning-making themes during different transition stages, this study provides a new perspective in investigating LGBTQIA+ identity construction. Unlike existing models of LGBTQIA+ identity development which adopted an essentialist perspective (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982), this study captures the social and cultural challenges the LGBTQIA+ individuals have during their transition stages by adopting a transitional perspective. The stages are depicted in a simplified manner for the purpose of clarity, but this does not mean there are definite and distinct boundaries between them. Importantly, the identification of transition stages helps us specify what kind of support may be useful to facilitate their transition.

Previous studies have shown meaningful information as an intricate blend of cognitive, affective, and situational elements (Choo & Nadarajah, 2014; Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021; Ruthven, 2019). The process of meaning construction is believed as a shared experience with the community (Chatman, 1999; Genuis & Bronstein, 2017; Ruthven, 2019). However, limited understanding has been provided regarding how individuals engage with one another and the role of these interactions in shaping the construction of meaning. This study contributes to the current LIS literature by identifying the types and attributes of peer interactions in an online community in the context of LGBTQIA+ individuals constructing their sexual and gender identity. By exploring a unique and highly personal context, this study extends the information behavior theory of transitions (Ruthven, 2021a) through the identification of the information and support being sought and provided within LGBTQIA+ communities, and the theorizing of three types of peer online interactions in identity meaning construction. The peer online interactions identified also enrich Park's (Park, 2010) meaning-making model by providing an empirical understanding of cognitive and emotional processing, and situational meaning-making.

Our findings show individuals' persistence in seeking the meaning of various situations, triggered by a disposition to understand oneself and the cognitive and affective efforts made in the process. Information from experienced community members is crucial to enabling meaning-making. They provide predictable, comprehensive, and manageable ways to navigate a specific situation while normalizing and validating the information seekers' experience. Our results draw attention to the power that exists within a community. The framework can be applied to other life transition circumstances to provide contextual and informed insights into human-information, and human-human interactions.

5.6 | Practical implications

The model has practical implications for how information services can better support LGBTQIA+ individuals' meaning-making during the identity transition. The identified meaning-making themes can inform the content development of LGBTQIA+ centered online services. While meaning-making topics differ across transition stages, this study demonstrates that cognitive, affective, and situational interactions are vital for information to be perceived as meaningful throughout the whole process of identity transitions.

The peer interaction patterns identified have implications on social media apps for LGBTQIA+ identities to provide a better space for LGBTQIA+ individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences and identities, find support, and explore their identities in an engaging and supportive environment. The findings show that meaning-based approaches are essential for helping people withstand and recover from highly stressful experiences. The cognitive, affective, and situational interactions can inform LGBTQIA+ online peer support, affirmative services, and help-seeking intervention design. For example, supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals with unreasonable beliefs such as self-blame and anxiety management by providing encouragement and reassurance to replace negative thoughts and restore their meaning systems. Our findings also highlight the importance of empowering life transition-themed communities, which would provide support for coping with transitions and community advocacy for public awareness and education.

The information and peer interaction model can also inform the design and delivery of interactive educational programs that focus on sexual and gender identity created by information service providers and government inclusion departments to better support and engage with LGBTQIA+ communities. In addition, the meaning-making interaction patterns can be used for informing guidance for health care professionals on communication with LGBTQIA+ clients to build an inclusive environment in health care settings.

5.7 | Limitations

The main limitation of the study is the relatively short period of data collection. Our dataset consisted of one-month posts in an LGBTQIA+ online forum. An extended period would be better which allows for capturing more diverse interactions. Using an anonymous forum also means we cannot verify community contributors' identities. We noticed community members crossing posts in different forums which provided limited

information about their identities. Therefore, we only analyzed the interactions by examining the posts instead of the posters.

We did not examine the degree of individual interactions with others, such as the frequency of posts. We also noticed that posts in the gay forum are notably fewer in comparison to lesbian, bisexual, and transgender forums. The visibility and acceptance of various LGBTQ+ identities have evolved differently over time, potentially influencing the willingness to share personal experiences online. It is important to approach this observation with sensitivity, recognizing that individual experiences can vary greatly, and multiple factors may contribute to these disparities in online posting behavior.

The sample used in the study was largely representative of a Western perspective on gender and sexuality. The findings may not be applicable to individuals from other cultural backgrounds. Although a few posters identified themselves as Asian, most posters seem to be from Western countries. Future studies should aim to include a more diverse sample that includes individuals from a range of cultural backgrounds. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the information behavior of LGBTQIA+ individuals across different cultural contexts and help to address potential biases in the current study. Intersectionality would provide a valuable analytical framework for comprehending how various elements of an individual's social and cultural identities interact. Collecting data from an online forum also means we have minimal information to examine community members' subjective satisfaction with the interactions.

6 | CONCLUSION

Online forums create a safe and supportive space for people to ask questions and share knowledge and experience regarding transition challenges. This study examined LGBTQIA+ individuals' meaning-making process during identity construction. By examining online communications, we can observe how they construct the meaning of their identities and provide support and information for others. Three types of peer interactions across three stages of transitions were revealed. Beyond advancing the understanding of LGBTQIA+ individuals' life challenges during the transition, this study demonstrates how multiple types of interactions can support the construction of a new sense and meaning out of people's new realities. Though the investigation of online communication has uncovered the interaction patterns, how information is used for meaning-making by LGBTQIA+ individuals requires further exploration. Future work should explore

the use of information and meaning obtained through in-depth interviews.

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