

The Relationship Between Disclosure and Self-Protection: Transgender Individuals' Lived Experiences of Managing Identity-Disclosure Boundaries in Educational Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand transgender individuals' lived experiences of managing identity-disclosure boundaries in educational relationships and the role of relational safety in this process. The present article constitutes a focused analysis of a broader qualitative study conducted using Moustakas's descriptive phenomenological approach. Participants were eight transgender individuals aged 18–30 years who had experience living and studying in Tehran and were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. For the present article, interview transcripts, meaning units, individual thematic clusters, and cross-case findings were revisited and compared with a specific focus on disclosure, concealment, appraisal of others' reactions, and relational safety. Four themes emerged from the final analysis: "reading the other and anticipating the consequences of disclosure," "regulating boundaries of access to identity-related information," "the costs of self-protection," and "relational safety and a reduced need for constant vigilance." Nondisclosure did not carry the same meaning for all participants. In some situations, it functioned as a means of reducing the likelihood of harm, whereas in others it represented an exercise of personal control over privacy. Likewise, disclosure was not invariably experienced as liberating; depending on the quality of the relationship, it could be accompanied either by a sense of recognition or by increased vulnerability. Managing identity disclosure in educational relationships is a situational, relational, and multivalent process. What matters is not merely the extent to which an individual is "out," but the degree of agency they retain over when, to whom, how, and to what extent others gain access to identity-related information. Trustworthy educational relationships can reduce the need for constant vigilance and explanation, even when the broader institutional environment remains restrictive.

Keywords: transgender; identity disclosure; educational relationships; relational safety; phenomenology

1. Introduction

Gender identity is a central dimension of psychological experience and social positioning, shaping how individuals understand themselves, interact with others, and negotiate recognition within institutional environments. For transgender individuals, however, the expression and recognition of gender identity often occur within social contexts structured by cisnormative expectations, binary gender categories, and institutional practices that may not adequately accommodate gender diversity. Educational settings are particularly important in this regard because they combine sustained interpersonal contact, formal authority relations, peer evaluation, administrative procedures, and highly visible expectations concerning names, appearance, clothing, documentation, and gendered participation. Consequently, schools and universities may operate simultaneously as contexts of learning and development and as environments in which transgender individuals must repeatedly evaluate whether, when, how, and to whom their gender identity should be disclosed. Research on transgender students has consistently demonstrated that educational experiences cannot be understood solely in terms of academic participation; they also involve ongoing negotiations of safety, belonging, visibility, recognition, and self-protection (McGuire et al., 2010; Pampati et al., 2020; Scrofani et al., 2025).

One influential framework for understanding these experiences is minority stress theory, which proposes that members of stigmatized social groups are exposed to additional stressors arising from prejudice, discrimination, expectations of rejection, concealment, and internalized stigma (Meyer, 2003). Although originally formulated primarily in relation to sexual minority populations, minority stress perspectives have subsequently been extended and adapted to gender minority experiences. The Gender Minority Stress and Resilience framework has further distinguished between distal stressors, such as discrimination, rejection, nonaffirmation, and victimization, and proximal processes, such as expectations of negative treatment, concealment, and internalized transphobia, while also recognizing the importance of resilience-related resources (Testa et al., 2015). From this perspective, decisions concerning disclosure and concealment are not isolated interpersonal choices. They are embedded within broader histories of anticipated or experienced invalidation and may function as strategies for reducing exposure to social threat. At the same time, such strategies may

themselves impose psychological costs by requiring vigilance, monitoring, behavioral regulation, and sustained attention to how one is perceived by others.

Educational contexts can intensify these processes because students are repeatedly exposed to peers, instructors, administrators, and institutional rules over extended periods. Transgender students may therefore need to anticipate not only immediate interpersonal responses to disclosure but also possible consequences for classroom participation, academic relationships, access to facilities, administrative interactions, and longer-term educational trajectories. Early mixed-method research on school climate documented the importance of harassment, perceived safety, institutional responses, and support systems in shaping transgender youths' educational experiences (McGuire et al., 2010). Subsequent work has shown that perceived safety, school connectedness, bullying, and absenteeism are strongly interrelated dimensions of school climate for transgender students (Pampati et al., 2020). More recent ecological analyses have emphasized that school climate should not be conceptualized as a single global characteristic but as the product of interactions among individual, relational, institutional, and wider sociocultural systems (Scrofani et al., 2025). Such findings suggest that disclosure decisions are likely to be context dependent because the risks and meanings associated with visibility may differ considerably across classrooms, peer groups, faculty relationships, and institutional spaces.

The psychological significance of educational climate is also reflected in research connecting school experiences with mental health. Transgender and gender-diverse youth who encounter less supportive school environments may experience greater psychological distress, whereas supportive adults and affirming school relationships can operate as important protective resources (McQuillan et al., 2024). Similarly, school-related factors such as belonging, safety, supportive relationships, and exposure to mistreatment have been associated with mental health outcomes among transgender and gender-diverse youth (Parodi et al., 2022). Research examining gender minority stress in educational contexts has further highlighted how repeated misgendering, exclusion, hostility, institutional inaction, and pressure to conform to gendered expectations may contribute to chronic stress and undermine psychological well-being (Horton, 2023). These findings indicate that interpersonal relationships within educational environments are not merely secondary features of the student experience. Rather, they can influence whether an

individual experiences the environment as manageable, threatening, or psychologically exhausting.

Studies of coping among transgender youth likewise suggest that students actively develop strategies for navigating potentially unsafe educational contexts. Such strategies may include seeking supportive peers or adults, avoiding particular spaces, monitoring self-presentation, limiting disclosure, modifying behavior, or selectively expressing identity depending on anticipated consequences (Johns et al., 2021). Importantly, these strategies should not automatically be interpreted as maladaptive. In potentially hostile environments, selective disclosure or nondisclosure can represent an intentional attempt to preserve safety and maintain control over sensitive personal information. At the same time, persistent monitoring of one's appearance, speech, behavior, relationships, and identity-related information may require substantial emotional and cognitive effort. Thus, the same strategy may be protective in one respect while constraining social participation, authenticity, or psychological ease in another. Understanding this tension is essential for avoiding overly simplistic interpretations in which disclosure is automatically equated with psychological health and concealment with pathology.

This distinction has become particularly important in the emerging literature on transgender identity concealment. A recent scoping review has shown that concealment research remains conceptually inconsistent and that associations between concealment and mental health are more complex than is often assumed (Osmetti et al., 2025). Concealment may be driven by fear of discrimination, but it can also reflect privacy, selective boundary setting, situational judgment, or a deliberate refusal to make personal identity information available to others. Moreover, researchers have not always clearly distinguished between involuntary invisibility, fear-based hiding, nondisclosure, strategic privacy, and active management of identity-related information (Osmetti et al., 2025). Treating these experiences as equivalent risks obscuring important differences in agency and meaning. A person who withholds identity information because disclosure is perceived as dangerous may experience nondisclosure differently from a person who chooses not to disclose because the information is considered private or irrelevant to a particular relationship. Accordingly, the psychological significance of disclosure management depends not only on whether identity information is communicated, but also on the degree of choice and control involved.

The literature on transgender students' lived experiences supports this more relational and contextual understanding. Qualitative research with college students has shown that gender transition during university life may involve complex negotiations of identity, institutional recognition, peer relationships, and continuity of academic participation (Cain et al., 2024). Students may experience periods in which their identities become particularly visible because of changes in names, pronouns, clothing, appearance, or administrative records, making disclosure difficult to conceptualize as a single, clearly bounded event. Instead, identity management may unfold incrementally across relationships and situations. Interpretative phenomenological research has similarly identified challenges associated with institutional practices and social responses while also documenting the importance of supportive relationships, personal agency, and affirming environments in transgender and gender-nonconforming college students' experiences (Curry et al., 2023). These findings point toward disclosure as an ongoing relational process rather than a one-time declaration.

The complexity of this process becomes especially evident when visibility itself is understood as ambivalent. On the one hand, being recognized in accordance with one's gender identity may provide validation, reduce the burden of misrecognition, and enable more authentic participation. On the other hand, increased visibility may also expose individuals to judgment, questioning, harassment, or administrative scrutiny. Transgender students may therefore seek not simply to become more visible or less visible, but to regulate the conditions under which visibility occurs. Such regulation includes decisions about who receives identity-related information, when disclosure occurs, what degree of detail is provided, and whether particular aspects of the self should remain inaccessible within specific relationships. This shifts the conceptual focus from disclosure as a binary behavior toward disclosure management as a form of interpersonal boundary regulation.

Recent research with transgender and nonbinary graduate students in academic science illustrates how these negotiations persist even at advanced levels of education. Institutional culture, disciplinary norms, social expectations, and perceived support can shape whether transgender students experience academic spaces as inclusive or as requiring continuous self-regulation (Nolan et al., 2025). These dynamics are important because universities are often imagined as relatively liberal or inclusive settings, yet local departmental cultures and interpersonal relationships may differ substantially within the same institution. A student

may feel secure with particular peers or faculty members while remaining cautious in administrative interactions, laboratories, classrooms, or other institutional settings. Consequently, relational safety may exist locally even when the broader environment continues to contain restrictive or gendered practices.

The distinction between institutional climate and relational safety is therefore analytically useful. Institutional policies may establish formal protections, but individuals experience educational environments through concrete relationships. A trustworthy classmate can reduce isolation; an affirming instructor can modify the perceived risks of classroom participation; and a supportive supervisor can influence whether a student feels able to continue an academic trajectory. Conversely, a single relationship characterized by authority, invalidation, or unpredictability may increase vigilance even when the institution formally endorses inclusion. Qualitative studies have repeatedly emphasized the importance of interpersonal support in transgender students' experiences of coping and success (Cain et al., 2024; Curry et al., 2023). Research on school climate likewise indicates that adult support and connectedness can buffer some of the effects of hostile environments (Johns et al., 2021; McQuillan et al., 2024). These findings raise an important question: not only whether an educational environment is generally supportive, but how particular relationships alter the amount of monitoring and self-protection required from transgender individuals.

Relational safety can be understood as the experience that one's presence, identity-related information, and interpersonal boundaries will be treated with sufficient respect and predictability to reduce the need for continuous defensive monitoring. This does not necessarily imply that an environment is completely free of discrimination or structural constraint. An individual may experience safety with a trusted friend or professor while continuing to navigate gender-segregated facilities, restrictive dress expectations, incompatible documentation, or institutional procedures. In such situations, relational safety may not eliminate structural stressors but may reduce the immediate burden of explanation, concealment, and self-surveillance. This distinction is especially important for phenomenological research because the subjective meaning of safety may emerge not from the absence of all threat but from the presence of relationships in which the individual can reduce vigilance.

The Iranian context adds further importance to examining these processes from the standpoint of lived experience.

Existing Iranian research has documented the psychosocial difficulties faced by transgender individuals and students, including social judgment, family and interpersonal challenges, institutional barriers, stigma, and difficulties within educational environments (Valadbeigi et al., 2022; Yaghoubi Choubari & Saedi, 2020). A phenomenological study of transgender individuals in Mashhad highlighted the complexity of their lived experiences and the significance of social interactions in shaping their everyday psychological and interpersonal worlds (Yaghoubi Choubari & Saedi, 2020). Research focusing specifically on transgender students at the University of Tehran has likewise identified psychosocial processes through which students navigate academic and social environments under conditions that may include stigmatization, identity-related strain, and the need for adaptation (Valadbeigi et al., 2022). More recent Iranian narrative research has documented the challenges encountered by a transgender student in the school context, drawing attention to the role of school relationships, institutional responses, and the broader social environment in shaping educational experience (Ghafouri et al., 2024). Together, these studies establish the importance of examining educational life not simply as an institutional context but as a network of relationships through which identity is recognized, contested, concealed, or selectively communicated.

Nevertheless, important conceptual gaps remain. Much of the existing research on transgender students has focused on discrimination, bullying, mental health, school climate, institutional barriers, or general coping processes. These domains are essential, but they do not fully explain how individuals manage the interpersonal boundaries surrounding identity disclosure in everyday educational relationships. The terms disclosure and concealment may imply a binary distinction, whereas lived experience may involve partial disclosure, selective silence, indirect recognition, gradual disclosure, strategic ambiguity, or situations in which others acquire information without the individual intentionally disclosing it. Moreover, nondisclosure may reflect fear in one context and autonomy in another. Likewise, disclosure may produce relief, recognition, and connection in some relationships while increasing vulnerability in others. A focus on boundary management makes it possible to examine these apparently contradictory experiences without assuming that either openness or concealment has a fixed psychological meaning.

A related gap concerns the temporal dimension of disclosure management. Anticipation of others' reactions is

rarely based solely on the present interaction; it is shaped by previous experiences of acceptance, invalidation, surveillance, or rejection. Minority stress research underscores the role of expectations of rejection in shaping proximal stress processes (Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015), while educational studies demonstrate that prior bullying or institutional mistreatment may influence later coping and perceptions of safety (Horton, 2023; Johns et al., 2021). Thus, a student may engage in heightened caution even in a currently neutral setting because earlier experiences have altered the anticipated probability and perceived consequences of harm. From a phenomenological standpoint, such anticipatory processes are important because they reveal how past experiences become incorporated into present ways of perceiving relationships and regulating one's behavior.

The consequences of continuous disclosure management also require closer attention. When individuals repeatedly assess others, regulate information, modify appearance or behavior, and anticipate possible exposure, self-protection may become a form of ongoing psychological labor. Such labor may consume attention and emotional resources that would otherwise be available for learning, social engagement, and participation. The resulting withdrawal or reduced participation could easily be misinterpreted as a stable personality characteristic rather than as a contextually produced response to perceived interpersonal risk. School-climate research has demonstrated links among safety, connectedness, bullying, and participation-related outcomes such as absenteeism (Pampati et al., 2020), while studies of transgender students' lived experiences have highlighted the ways institutional and interpersonal conditions shape patterns of engagement and withdrawal (Cain et al., 2024; Ghafouri et al., 2024). Examining the costs of self-protection therefore provides a means of understanding how seemingly adaptive strategies may also restrict educational and relational participation.

At the same time, research increasingly cautions against framing transgender individuals exclusively through vulnerability and adversity. The presence of agency, resilience, relational support, and strategic adaptation is central to understanding how individuals navigate complex environments (Curry et al., 2023; Testa et al., 2015). Decisions about disclosure can themselves constitute expressions of agency when individuals determine the timing, audience, form, and extent of access to identity-related information. From this perspective, psychological well-being may depend less on maximizing disclosure than

on preserving meaningful control over disclosure. Such control allows individuals to distinguish between relationships in which openness is desired, relationships in which privacy is preferred, and situations in which disclosure might expose them to unacceptable risk. This approach also avoids treating privacy as evidence of shame and instead recognizes that selective access to personal information is a legitimate interpersonal boundary.

Taken together, the literature suggests that identity disclosure among transgender individuals in educational settings should be examined as a dynamic process situated at the intersection of minority stress, institutional climate, interpersonal power, relational trust, privacy, agency, and prior experience. Existing quantitative and qualitative studies have established the importance of safety, connectedness, institutional support, discrimination, coping, and mental health (McQuillan et al., 2024; Parodi et al., 2022; Scrofani et al., 2025), while phenomenological and narrative studies have demonstrated the value of examining how these processes are actually lived and interpreted by transgender students (Ghafouri et al., 2024; Valadbeigi et al., 2022; Yaghoubi Choubari & Saedi, 2020). What remains insufficiently understood is how transgender individuals themselves experience the moment-to-moment and relationship-to-relationship regulation of identity information, how they distinguish self-protective concealment from intentional privacy, how anticipated reactions shape educational interactions, what psychological and social costs accompany sustained vigilance, and how trustworthy relationships may reduce the perceived need for continuous self-monitoring.

Therefore, the present study aimed to understand transgender individuals' lived experiences of managing identity-disclosure boundaries in educational relationships and to elucidate the role of relational safety in this process.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a qualitative approach based on Moustakas's (1994) descriptive phenomenological method. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria consisted of self-identification as transgender, being 18–30 years of age, having experience living and studying in Tehran, currently being a university student or having attended an educational setting during the previous two years, and being able to participate in an in-depth interview. A total of nine

individuals were interviewed. Following the final assessment of the inclusion criteria, data from one individual were excluded from the primary analysis because the

participant did not meet the criterion of self-identification as transgender at the time of study entry. Consequently, data from eight participants formed the basis of the analysis.

Table 1

General Characteristics of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Educational Status at the Time of Interview
Sam	25	Trans man	Bachelor's degree graduate
Raha	29	Trans woman	Incomplete bachelor's degree
Radin	24	Trans man	Bachelor's student
Mahan	27	Trans man	Master's degree graduate
Kian	26	Trans man	Master's student
Arsalan	29	Trans man	Bachelor's degree graduate
Aria	28	Trans man	Master's degree graduate
Bardia	20	Trans man	Bachelor's student

2.2. Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview guide focused on participants' educational experiences while allowing each participant to follow the trajectory of their own narrative and discuss in detail situations that were personally meaningful. Follow-up questions were used to clarify the context of the experience, relationships with others, and the meaning participants attributed to particular events. Interview duration varied according to the breadth of participants' narratives and generally ranged from approximately 60 to 90 minutes. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and reviewed.

2.3. Data Analysis

Analysis of the broader study was conducted according to Moustakas's phenomenological framework. Interview transcripts were read several times, significant statements were identified through horizontalization, and relevant nonredundant statements were transformed into meaning units. The meaning units were then organized into thematic clusters for each participant, on the basis of which individual textural and structural descriptions were developed. Subsequently, cross-case analysis was conducted to identify commonalities and differences across participants' experiences.

For the present article, the interview transcripts, codes, and thematic clusters of all eight participants were reread with a focus on four areas: decisions regarding disclosure or nondisclosure; anticipation of others' reactions; strategies for regulating information or one's manner of presence; and experiences of safety or lack of safety within relationships. These four areas served only as initial focal points for rereading the data and were not treated as predetermined categories. The final formulation of the themes emerged through case comparison, attention to differences in meaning, and repeated returns to the raw data. Cases that did not conform to the dominant pattern were also retained because the aim was not to construct a uniform pattern but rather to clarify the different meanings attached to behaviors that might appear similar on the surface.

3. Findings and Results

Cross-case rereading indicated that disclosure was not a fixed decision for the participants. Depending on the situation, previous experiences, type of relationship, the other person's position, and anticipated consequences, participants made decisions about the extent to which they would be visible and the amount of information they would make available to others. Four themes emerged from the final analysis:

Table 2

Themes of the Focused Analysis and Illustrative Participants

Theme	Core Meaning	Illustrative Participants
Reading the other and anticipating the consequences of disclosure	Evaluating likely reactions and regulating behavior before disclosure	Raha, Kian, Aria
Regulating boundaries of access to identity-related information	Determining who should know what, when, and to what extent	Arsalan, Bardia, Radin
The costs of self-protection	Psychological and social costs associated with persistent vigilance and reduced visibility	Sam, Mahan, Kian, Raha
Relational safety and a reduced need for constant vigilance	Reduced self-monitoring in relationships with trustworthy and supportive individuals	Radin, Aria, Sam, Raha

1. Reading the Other and Anticipating the Consequences of Disclosure

For some participants, decisions about disclosure began primarily with an appraisal of the other person: Is this relationship trustworthy? Might the other person be judgmental? Could disclosure affect the continuation of the relationship, classroom participation, or the individual's educational position? Previous experiences also informed these appraisals, leading participants to consider the possibility of harm even in situations where no explicit threat was present.

Raha described this experience particularly clearly. Reflecting on her school and university years, she explained: "Throughout school, I completely hid this, and the hard part for me was simply not being myself. At university, the security office gave me so much trouble about my appearance that I dropped out in my third semester and gave up on studying. As for my voice, if I felt I was somewhere where being trans wouldn't be received well, I would change my voice. In many places, the environment might actually have been fine, but because of fear and my previous experiences with society, I preferred not to take the risk."

In Raha's narrative, vigilance was not merely a response to an immediate negative encounter; concealment had become part of her way of navigating social environments since her school years and continued at university under pressure associated with surveillance of her appearance, clothing, and identity documents. Previous experiences led her to anticipate judgment or involuntary disclosure even in situations where no explicit threat was evident. Concealment therefore served two simultaneous functions for her: It could reduce the likelihood of an adverse encounter, but it also came at the cost of feeling that she was "not being herself" and of maintaining continuous caution.

For Kian, the appraisal of others' likely reactions had similarly become incorporated into educational decision-

making. This appraisal developed within a context in which he had encountered both invalidating and humiliating experiences at university and professors and classmates who enabled him to continue his academic path with less pressure. When selecting a thesis supervisor, he assessed faculty members' likely attitudes toward his circumstances and attempted to avoid entering a relationship in which he anticipated greater judgment or difficulty. In this context, academic choices were not determined solely by the scientific subject matter; the anticipated quality of the relationship had also become part of the decision-making process. The broader context of Kian's account further indicated that silence, caution, and the persistent need to explain himself played important roles in his experience.

Aria followed a different trajectory. His experience was not characterized by widespread rejection from peers, and during parts of both school and university he experienced himself as socially active, engaged, and accepted. Nevertheless, such acceptance did not eliminate the need to regulate his manner of presence. In some everyday university situations, he adjusted his appearance and clothing so that he would be less frequently required to explain himself, and even his choice of where to sit in the classroom carried particular meaning. He explained, "I always tried to sit in the middle of the classroom." In his experience, situational appraisal coexisted with relatively supportive relationships rather than occurring only under conditions of overt rejection. His textural account also indicated that an important part of his self-awareness and manner of being present developed through the gaze and reactions of others.

2. Regulating Boundaries of Access to Identity-Related Information

Not all instances of nondisclosure resulted from fear. In some narratives, refraining from explaining one's identity constituted a means of establishing relational boundaries:

The individual determined which aspects of their experience would be accessible to whom and at what time.

“Then you don’t need to tell them whether I am or I’m not... Why should I occupy someone’s mind with it?” (Arsalan)

In Arsalan’s experience, being known within long-term relationships did not necessarily depend on a single explicit act of disclosure. In some relationships, years of shared memories, behavior, and relational continuity had gradually enabled mutual understanding. Thus, for him, “being known” and “disclosing” were not necessarily the same event. At times, he preferred not to introduce information into a relationship that he did not consider necessary, and he did not equate this lack of explanation with shame or denial of his experience. In this account, silence could constitute a form of agency: a decision concerning who was entitled to access personal information and to what extent.

Bardia illustrated a different dimension of the same boundary-management process. For him, being visible was an ambivalent experience: It could expose him to judgment and rejection, yet it could also provide his experience of self with a greater sense of reality and validation. Describing the attention he received from others at school, he stated:

“The attention from other people made me feel that who I really am and who I want to be was being seen. Even if, for example, they thought, ‘How strange is this person?’ or ‘How ugly is this?’ or whatever it was, I feel like I was willing to put up with it.” (Bardia)

Thus, becoming invisible was not necessarily desirable for Bardia. His school experience involved peer surveillance, bullying, and difficulty finding a safe space; however, being seen sometimes made an aspect of his experience of self feel real and visible. Accordingly, visibility was not simply a “risk,” just as remaining concealed was not simply a form of “protection.” This ambivalence suggests that the central issue is not merely whether one is disclosed or concealed, but rather the extent of personal agency over how one is seen and over the consequences of that visibility.

For Radin, disclosure was similarly a gradual and situational process. He drew a clear comparison between his silence during school and his later way of being at university:

“Either you sit there silently like you did in high school, or you say it and, at worst, they reject you... Not saying it can itself be the greatest possible harm.” (Radin)

For Radin, therefore, silence was not invariably protective, nor was disclosure without cost. His movement from silence and conforming to environmental expectations

toward more explicit communication of his name and preferred form of address occurred gradually. His experience demonstrated that the boundary between speaking and remaining silent can shift over time and that its meaning depends on anticipated consequences, the individual’s degree of readiness, and the availability of relational support.

3. The Costs of Self-Protection

Strategies employed to reduce the likelihood of harm were not always without cost. At times, being less visible or saying less made continued participation possible, while simultaneously restricting the individual’s relationships, participation, and sense of ease.

“Within the faculty itself, I had to wear the maghnaeh because I had to attend my classes. I would just go there so I could get through university... Yes, it was very limited. Very limited.” (Sam)

In some situations, Sam wore a face mask to attract less attention and limited his presence as much as possible to attending classes. These behaviors became meaningful within the discrepancy between his experience of self and the ways in which clothing requirements, appearance, or official information positioned him within a gender category. The significance of this experience becomes clearer when contrasted with other parts of the same university where he could present himself in clothing more consistent with his preferences and meet friends, contexts in which he reported warmer and more active social relationships. His distancing behavior, therefore, cannot be interpreted simply as a personality characteristic; his level of social participation changed according to how he was seen and the extent to which he could regulate his manner of presence.

Following a difficult childhood experience, Mahan likewise associated expressing his identity with the possibility that the same type of encounter might recur:

“I still remember what the room looked like... So that I wouldn’t have to go there again, I stopped talking about it.” (Mahan)

Although that encounter occurred outside an educational environment, its consequences carried over into school. Before that experience, Mahan had possessed a relatively clear sense of self; however, fear of repeating an encounter in which his experience had been invalidated led him to stop expressing it. In subsequent years, silence, withdrawal, and retreat into his inner world became part of his way of navigating school. The data do not allow all of this social isolation to be attributed solely to his gender-related experience, but they demonstrate how a prior experience can

contribute to subsequent self-restriction and reduced interpersonal engagement.

After being advised to remain silent at his new school, Bardia also attempted to restrict his relationships; however, peer harassment resumed shortly thereafter. Reflecting later on his coping strategies, he stated:

"I knew how to behave so that the same things I had already gone through wouldn't happen to me again." (Bardia)

For Bardia, this process of "learning how" to behave represented a form of adaptation to the environment, but it was not without cost. He also linked it to becoming more introverted and less willing to form close relationships with others. Kian's experience demonstrated another dimension of the same cost. In his individual thematic clusters, being present at university was associated with persistent self-monitoring, continuous management of identity-related information, and the expenditure of energy on controlling the situation. Consequently, self-protection was not merely a series of momentary decisions; it could become an ongoing and exhausting form of labor that consumed part of the psychological energy otherwise available for educational participation.

4. Relational Safety and a Reduced Need for Constant Vigilance

For participants, safety was not necessarily a characteristic of the school or university as a whole. The broader structure of the environment could remain gendered and restrictive, while a single friend, classmate, or professor could substantially alter the experience of being present. Within such relationships, the need to explain oneself, defend oneself, or remain constantly vigilant about self-presentation decreased.

"The professor is at the top of the power hierarchy. If a problem comes up, I need to know that the professor has my back... that at least one person sitting next to me knows about my situation and accepts it." (Radin)

For Radin, faculty support meant more than interpersonal warmth; the professor's position of authority within the classroom structure was important. His sense of safety increased when he knew that, should a problem arise, someone with institutional authority would support him and that at least one person in the environment was aware of and accepting of his circumstances. Thus, relational safety in his experience concerned both interpersonal trust and the perceived reliability of a supportive individual within the educational power structure.

In Aria's experience, support from classmates was tangible in gender-segregated university situations. During physical education courses, his friends took his circumstances into account: "They always looked out for me... They would say, 'You go ahead.'" (Aria)

This support did not eliminate the gendered rules of the environment, but it made navigating such situations more tolerable. Aria's experience demonstrated that structural constraint and relational safety can coexist: He still encountered gender-segregated entrances, spaces, and activities, but his friends' respect for his boundaries and the understanding shown by some professors reduced his need to explain or continually defend himself. In this sense, relational safety did not mean the "complete absence of pressure," but rather the possibility of being present with less vigilance in the company of specific individuals.

Raha likewise experienced greater comfort only within a limited group of university friends. Nevertheless, in her experience, a sense of belonging was sometimes fragile and could coexist with anxiety that information unknown to others might be disclosed. Sam also experienced warmer social relationships in parts of the university where his friends were present and where he had greater freedom to present himself in accordance with his preferences. These differences demonstrate that the same educational environment can simultaneously generate varying degrees of safety and unsafety, and that the quality of specific relationships can modify the degree of vigilance required without necessarily eliminating broader structural constraints.

Taken together, the four themes indicate that disclosure management is an ongoing process of regulating the boundary between being seen and protecting the self. Participants appraised other people and situations, regulated others' access to identity-related information, endured or readjusted the costs associated with such vigilance, and, within trustworthy relationships, could experience a reduced need for self-defense and self-monitoring. The shared essence of the experience therefore did not lie in a fixed choice between "disclosure" and "concealment," but in maintaining or reclaiming agency over how one is known. From this perspective, neither silence is inherently protective nor disclosure inherently liberating. The meaning and function of each depend on the individual's personal history, the situation, the quality of the relationship, the other person's position of power, and the degree of agency available to the individual.

4. Discussion

The present study examined transgender individuals' lived experiences of managing identity-disclosure boundaries in educational relationships and the role of relational safety in this process. The findings indicated that identity disclosure was not experienced as a single, stable, or binary decision. Rather, participants continuously evaluated others, anticipated possible consequences, regulated access to identity-related information, managed the psychological and social costs of self-protection, and adjusted the degree of vigilance required according to the perceived safety of particular relationships. Four interconnected themes were identified: reading the other and anticipating the consequences of disclosure; regulating boundaries of access to identity-related information; the costs of self-protection; and relational safety and a reduced need for constant vigilance. Collectively, these findings suggest that the central psychological issue is not simply whether a transgender individual discloses or conceals their identity, but the extent to which they retain agency over the conditions under which they are known by others.

The first theme, reading the other and anticipating the consequences of disclosure, showed that participants rarely approached disclosure as an isolated act. Instead, they evaluated the interpersonal and institutional environment before deciding how much information to reveal. These evaluations included judgments about whether another person might be supportive, dismissive, judgmental, or potentially harmful, as well as whether disclosure could affect classroom participation, academic relationships, or continued engagement in the educational setting. This finding aligns with minority stress theory, which emphasizes expectations of rejection as an important proximal stress process among stigmatized groups (Meyer, 2003). In the context of gender minority stress, anticipation of invalidation, mistreatment, or nonaffirmation can shape behavior even when no immediate discriminatory event is occurring (Testa et al., 2015). The present findings extend this perspective by showing that anticipation itself becomes embedded in routine educational decision-making and may shape seemingly ordinary choices, such as selecting a supervisor, choosing where to sit, modifying one's voice, or adjusting one's appearance.

This finding is also consistent with research on transgender youth in educational settings demonstrating that students actively monitor school climates and adapt their behavior according to perceived safety and likely social

consequences (Johns et al., 2021; Pampati et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that transgender students' sense of safety is shaped not only by overt incidents of bullying or discrimination, but also by expectations about how peers, teachers, and institutions are likely to respond (McGuire et al., 2010). The participants in the present study similarly relied on accumulated prior experiences to interpret new situations. In several narratives, a previous negative encounter appeared to influence later caution, even in settings where no explicit current threat was evident. This pattern is compatible with the literature on gender minority stress in schools, which suggests that repeated experiences of exclusion, misrecognition, and institutional nonresponsiveness may produce persistent anticipatory vigilance (Horton, 2023). In this sense, disclosure management is temporally layered: current decisions are partly organized by memories of prior interactions and by expectations that earlier forms of harm may recur.

The second theme, regulating boundaries of access to identity-related information, demonstrated that nondisclosure did not carry a uniform meaning. Participants sometimes withheld information because they feared rejection or harm, but in other situations they simply did not consider disclosure necessary or appropriate. This distinction is particularly important because concealment is often treated as though it necessarily reflects internalized stigma, fear, or psychological avoidance. Recent scholarship has questioned this assumption, emphasizing that transgender identity concealment is conceptually heterogeneous and may include privacy, strategic boundary management, selective disclosure, situational nondisclosure, and involuntary invisibility (Osmetti et al., 2025). The present findings strongly support this more differentiated interpretation. For some participants, choosing not to disclose was not experienced as denial of identity but as an exercise of control over who had access to personal information.

This interpretation also helps explain why "being known" and "disclosing" were not always equivalent in the participants' accounts. In some long-term relationships, others gradually came to understand the participant's experience without a single formal or explicit disclosure event. In other situations, participants selected only certain aspects of identity-related information for communication. Such experiences challenge the assumption that disclosure can be represented as a simple dichotomy between being "out" and "closeted." Qualitative studies of transgender students have similarly described identity negotiation as

gradual, relational, and context dependent, particularly during educational transitions (Cain et al., 2024). Transgender and gender-nonconforming college students may shift between different forms of visibility depending on social context, institutional demands, and the level of support available within particular relationships (Curry et al., 2023). The current results therefore suggest that disclosure is better conceptualized as the regulation of informational and interpersonal boundaries rather than as a single act of revelation.

The experiences of participants who described visibility as simultaneously affirming and risky further support this interpretation. For some individuals, being seen in a way that corresponded more closely with their sense of self provided recognition and psychological validation, even when visibility also increased the possibility of judgment. This ambivalence is important because it demonstrates that concealment is not inherently protective and visibility is not inherently harmful. The psychological meaning of each depends on whether visibility is chosen, how others respond, and whether the individual retains control over the process. This finding is consistent with qualitative evidence showing that transgender students often negotiate a tension between the desire for authentic recognition and the need to protect themselves from potentially hostile environments (Cain et al., 2024; Curry et al., 2023). It also supports the broader argument that agency over disclosure may be more psychologically relevant than the degree of disclosure itself.

The third theme concerned the costs of self-protection. Participants described behaviors intended to reduce exposure to harm, such as minimizing social contact, modifying clothing or self-presentation, remaining silent, controlling identity-related information, and limiting participation in certain educational spaces. Although these strategies could reduce immediate risk, they often imposed psychological and relational costs. Participants described exhaustion, restricted participation, reduced closeness with others, and the sense that educational attendance had become something to endure rather than a context in which they could fully engage. These findings are compatible with research showing that unsupportive school climates are associated with lower school connectedness, greater absenteeism, and increased psychological burden among transgender students (Pampati et al., 2020; Parodi et al., 2022).

The results also support minority stress models by illustrating how self-protective regulation can itself become burdensome. Proximal stress processes are not limited to

internal beliefs; they may involve sustained behavioral work, including self-monitoring, expectation management, concealment, and anticipation of rejection (Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015). In the present study, several participants described forms of vigilance that required continuous attention to how they were presenting themselves and how others might interpret them. This ongoing effort can be understood as a form of psychological labor. Rather than consisting of occasional stressful events, minority stress may therefore become integrated into routine participation in educational life.

Previous studies help contextualize this pattern. Transgender youth have been found to use various coping strategies in schools, including avoidance, selective engagement, and reliance on supportive relationships (Johns et al., 2021). Although such strategies may be adaptive under threatening conditions, their repeated use can also limit access to peer relationships, academic participation, and a sense of belonging. Research on school climate has likewise emphasized that exclusion, harassment, and institutional failures may shape not only mental health but also students' attendance and willingness to participate fully in school life (McGuire et al., 2010; McQuillan et al., 2024). The present findings add a phenomenological dimension to this literature by showing how these processes are experienced from within: self-protection may feel necessary, but over time it can become tiring, constricting, and socially isolating.

The fourth theme, relational safety and a reduced need for constant vigilance, showed that participants did not experience safety as a uniform characteristic of an entire educational institution. Instead, safety often emerged within particular relationships. A supportive friend, classmate, instructor, or academic supervisor could reduce the need for self-monitoring even when the wider institutional environment remained restrictive. This finding is consistent with prior studies emphasizing the protective role of supportive adults and affirming interpersonal relationships in transgender students' educational experiences (Johns et al., 2021; McQuillan et al., 2024). It also aligns with evidence that school connectedness and supportive social relationships are associated with better psychological outcomes among transgender and gender-diverse youth (Parodi et al., 2022).

Importantly, participants' accounts indicated that relational safety was influenced by the other person's position within the institutional structure. Support from a professor or supervisor could be particularly meaningful because such individuals possessed authority and could

potentially intervene when problems occurred. This suggests that relational safety is not reducible to interpersonal warmth. It may also include confidence that the supportive person has sufficient institutional power or credibility to provide protection when needed. This interpretation is compatible with ecological approaches to school climate, which emphasize that student experiences emerge through interactions across interpersonal and institutional levels (Scrofani et al., 2025). A supportive relationship may therefore function as a local protective context within an otherwise restrictive system.

The findings also correspond with qualitative research demonstrating that supportive faculty, peers, and institutional actors can significantly alter transgender students' experiences of navigating higher education (Cain et al., 2024; Curry et al., 2023). Similar dynamics have been reported among transgender and nonbinary graduate students, for whom disciplinary culture and institutional support can shape whether academic environments are experienced as inclusive or as requiring persistent self-regulation (Nolan et al., 2025). The present results suggest that the importance of such relationships may lie partly in reducing the cognitive and emotional work associated with constant explanation and self-defense. Where participants trusted others to respect their boundaries and respond supportively, they were able to reduce vigilance even if structural constraints remained unchanged.

These findings also have particular relevance within the Iranian educational context. Previous Iranian studies have documented social stigma, psychosocial strain, and educational challenges among transgender individuals (Valadbeigi et al., 2022; Yaghoubi Choubari & Saedi, 2020). Research with transgender students in Iran has shown that educational participation is shaped by complex interactions among identity, institutional demands, social responses, and personal coping processes (Valadbeigi et al., 2022). Narrative inquiry has similarly demonstrated that school contexts may expose transgender students to challenges involving social recognition, peer interactions, and institutional responses (Ghafouri et al., 2024). The present study builds on this literature by focusing specifically on the interpersonal regulation of disclosure and showing that the same educational environment may be experienced as relatively safe in one relationship and highly restrictive in another.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the four themes form a coherent process. Participants first assessed the likely consequences of being known, then regulated access to identity-related information, managed the psychological costs associated with self-protection, and adjusted their vigilance according to the degree of relational safety available. This process suggests that disclosure management should be understood as dynamic, relational, and context dependent. It also challenges normative assumptions that greater openness necessarily represents healthier adaptation. Previous research has already cautioned against oversimplifying identity concealment and has emphasized the need to distinguish between fear-driven concealment and intentional privacy (Osmetti et al., 2025). The present findings reinforce this argument by showing that the key issue is agency. Participants appeared to experience greater psychological difficulty when control over disclosure was constrained or when visibility was imposed by institutional practices, documentation, appearance regulation, or others' reactions. Conversely, greater comfort was associated with the ability to decide when, how, and to whom identity-related information became available. From this perspective, the central experiential tension is not simply between disclosure and concealment but between controlled and uncontrolled visibility. Being visible can be affirming when it occurs under conditions of recognition and choice, but harmful when it produces exposure, judgment, or loss of control. Similarly, nondisclosure can function as constraining concealment when driven by fear, but it can also represent legitimate privacy and self-determination. This interpretation integrates the present phenomenological findings with minority stress and resilience perspectives and highlights the importance of moving beyond binary assumptions about openness. It also underscores the value of relational safety as a psychological resource: supportive relationships do not necessarily remove structural inequalities, but they can reduce the amount of vigilance required to remain present within those structures.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of eight participants with experience living and studying in Tehran, which limits the transferability of the findings to transgender individuals in other cities, rural settings, cultural contexts, or educational systems. Second, the sample included only one trans woman and seven trans men, and the experiences identified may therefore more strongly reflect the perspectives of trans men. Third,

participants differed in age, educational level, and stage of educational involvement, creating heterogeneity that could not be fully explored within the scope of this focused analysis. Fourth, the findings relied on retrospective self-report and may have been influenced by memory, current interpretations of past experiences, or willingness to disclose sensitive events during interviews. Finally, because this article represents a focused reanalysis of a broader phenomenological study, the analysis was intentionally centered on disclosure, concealment, boundary regulation, and relational safety and may not capture other dimensions of participants' educational experiences.

Future research should examine identity-disclosure boundary management in more diverse samples that include greater variation in gender identity, socioeconomic background, educational level, geographic location, and institutional context. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining how disclosure strategies change across educational transitions and how previous experiences shape later expectations of safety. Comparative studies could investigate differences between schools and universities, public and private institutions, or educational environments with varying levels of formal support for gender diversity. Future qualitative work should also distinguish more explicitly among concealment driven by fear, intentional privacy, selective disclosure, involuntary disclosure, and gradual relational recognition. Mixed-method studies could further examine associations between perceived control over disclosure, relational safety, self-monitoring, academic engagement, psychological distress, and educational persistence.

Educational institutions should recognize that supportive practice does not require students to disclose more information than they wish to share. Policies and professional training should emphasize students' control over identity-related information, confidentiality, respectful forms of address, and avoidance of unnecessary questioning or forced disclosure. Faculty members, counselors, administrators, and student-support personnel should be trained to understand that silence or selective disclosure may reflect privacy and self-protection rather than denial or lack of trust. Institutions should also establish clear procedures through which students can identify supportive personnel and seek assistance without repeatedly explaining or defending their identities. Creating predictable, respectful, and confidential relationships may reduce the burden of constant vigilance and enable transgender students to devote

greater psychological and cognitive resources to learning, participation, and academic development.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. The study was conducted following approval by the Ethics Committee of the University of Science and Culture–Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR), under ethics approval code IR.ACECR.USC.REC.1404.118.

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