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Using IPA and Visual Methods to Explore the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Identifying Adolescents

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*“I’ve never met a gay person who regretted coming out – including myself.
Life begins to make sense when you are open and honest”.*

Ian McKellen.

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents. The aim of this was to develop a greater understanding of the interconnected environmental systems influencing the well-being of LGBTQ+ young people and to gain insight into how they can be supported. Creative visual methods were used with three LGBTQ+ adolescents to elicit verbal data within subsequent semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected purposefully, according to criteria designed to include previously marginalised LGBTQ+ groups. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was selected as the methodological approach.

Four super-ordinate themes were identified as a result of the analysis: acceptance, identity, stigma and support. Feelings of confusion and shame were common, and participants described a process of self-exploration and their journey towards self-acceptance. Sexual and gender identity was often non-binary and fluid, and participants described their flexible use of multiple identity-defining labels. The experience of marginalisation, prejudice, erasure, invisibility and microaggressions within a culture of heteronormativity and cisnormativity was shared. Peer-based, community-based, internet-based and family-based support were all considered significant and were used proactively by participants seeking information, practical support, advice or a sense of connection to the LGBTQ+ community. Acceptance was felt to be important, with immediate and implicit acceptance preferable to the need to 'come out'. Access to positive and diverse LGBTQ+ role models was regarded as a powerful form of validation and support. Although individual acts of inclusion, such as peer support groups and the use of chosen pronouns were highly valued, participants described a desire to challenge the heteronormative and cisgender status quo.

The study findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and psychological theory. Conclusions are presented and recommendations made for school staff, educational professionals and future research. Central to these recommendations is the need for a holistic and systemic approach to supporting LGBTQ+ adolescents.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Abstract	3
List of Tables	7
List of Figures	7
List of Abbreviations	8
Chapter 1: Introduction	9
Chapter 2: Literature Review	11
Introduction.....	11
Defining Terminology	12
Theoretical Background.....	14
Prevalence of LGBTQ+ Identities.....	15
Attitudes Towards LGBTQ+ Individuals	16
Impact on Children and Young People.....	18
Supporting LGBTQ+ Children and Young People	20
The Role of the Educational Psychologist.....	22
The Rights of LGBTQ+ Young People	23
Research which Engages with LGBTQ+ Young People	25
Summary and Research Aims	26
Chapter 3: Methodology	28
Overview.....	28
My Positionality.....	28
<i>Ontology</i>	29
<i>Epistemology</i>	29
<i>Theoretical Perspective</i>	30
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis	31
<i>Phenomenology</i>	32
<i>Hermeneutics</i>	34
<i>Idiography</i>	36
The Rationale for Selecting IPA.....	37
Limitations of IPA.....	39
Procedures	40
<i>Ethical Considerations</i>	40

<i>Participant Well-Being</i>	41
<i>Informed Consent and Confidentiality</i>	44
<i>Sample</i>	42
<i>Age</i>	44
<i>Recruitment Process</i>	46
<i>Method of Data Collection</i>	46
<i>Use of Visual Methods</i>	47
<i>Overview of Sessions</i>	49
<i>Semi-Structured Interviews</i>	52
<i>Analysis</i>	54
<i>Quality in Qualitative Research</i>	59
<i>Sensitivity to Context</i>	60
<i>Commitment and Rigour</i>	60
<i>Transparency and Coherence</i>	61
<i>Summary</i>	62
Chapter 4: Findings	63
<i>Overview</i>	63
<i>Participant Pen Portraits</i>	63
<i>Themes</i>	66
<i>Super-Ordinate Theme: Acceptance</i>	67
<i>Super-Ordinate Theme: Identity</i>	74
<i>Super-Ordinate Theme: Stigma</i>	81
<i>Super-Ordinate Theme: Support</i>	87
<i>Summary</i>	92
Chapter 5: Discussion	94
<i>Overview</i>	94
<i>Revisiting the Aims and Research Questions</i>	94
<i>'Coming out' and Acceptance</i>	94
<i>An Evolving Identity</i>	96
<i>The Flexible Use of Labels</i>	97
<i>Stigmatised Perceptions of Bisexuality</i>	98
<i>A Shared Experience of Microaggressions</i>	99
<i>Access to Peer-Based Support</i>	100
<i>The Power of LGBTQ+ Visibility and Representation</i>	102
<i>The Significance of Pronouns</i>	102

Implications for Educational Psychologists.....	103
Summary	106
Chapter 6: Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations	107
Overview.....	107
Conclusions	107
Evaluation of the Research.....	108
<i>Recruitment</i>	<i>108</i>
<i>Conducting Research as an LGBTQ+ Community Member</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Use of Visual Methods.....</i>	<i>110</i>
<i>Internet-Based Methods.....</i>	<i>112</i>
Unique Contribution	114
Recommendations for Practice	115
Recommendations for Further Research	117
References	119
Appendices	141
Appendix 1: Information Sheet for Potential Participants.....	141
Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Parents/Carers	144
Appendix 3: Consent Forms.....	149
Appendix 4: Letter Confirming Ethical Approval	152
Appendix 5: Interview Schedule	153
Appendix 6: Initial Reflections	154
Appendix 7: Exploratory Comments and Emergent Themes.....	159
Appendix 8: Generating Super-Ordinate Themes	164
Appendix 9 : Principal Table of Themes for the Group.....	179

List of Tables

Table 1: <i>Overview of Relevant LGBTQ+ Related Terminology</i>	12
Table 2: <i>Overview of the Analysis Process</i>	55
Table 3: <i>Pen Portraits Created by Participants</i>	64

List of Figures

Figure 1: <i>Summary of Philosophical Foundations of the Study</i>	31
Figure 2: <i>Outline of the Research Process</i>	44
Figure 3: <i>Phases of Research Indicating Activity at Each Stage</i>	51
Figure 4: <i>Visual Representation of Super-Ordinate Themes and Sub-Themes</i>	65
Figure 5: <i>Acceptance Title Page</i>	67
Figure 6: <i>Acceptance Visual Representation</i>	68
Figure 7: <i>Identity Title Page</i>	74
Figure 8: <i>Identity Visual Representation</i>	75
Figure 9: <i>Stigma Title Page</i>	81
Figure 10: <i>Stigma Visual Representation</i>	82
Figure 11: <i>Support Title Page</i>	87
Figure 12: <i>Support Visual Representation</i>	88

List of Abbreviations

AIDS:	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
BPS:	British Psychological Society
CYP:	Children and young people
EP:	Educational psychologist
GRC:	Gender Recognition Certificate
GSA	Gay-straight alliance
HBT:	Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic
HIV:	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HRA:	Human Rights Act
IPA:	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
LGB:	Lesbian, gay and bisexual
LGBT:	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans/transgender
LGBTQ+:	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, queer (and any other groups in the gender and sexual identity spectrum)
ONS:	Office for National Statistics
RSE:	Relationships and Sex Education
SENCO:	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator
UK:	United Kingdom
UNRC:	United Nations Rights of a Child

Chapter 1: Introduction

“All LGBT people should feel welcomed and safe at school, college and university so that they can reach their full potential” (Government Equalities Office, 2018). However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and questioning children and young people (CYP) have been identified as particularly vulnerable to bullying, discrimination and marginalisation (Hudson-Sharp & Metcalf, 2016). This research aims to explore the thoughts and feelings of LGBTQ+ adolescents regarding their significant and meaningful experiences. Understanding the need for transparency, I acknowledge my active role in the research process. I, therefore, start by explaining my personal connection to the topic of study.

Although I am now proudly gay, my experience of growing up during the 1980s and 1990s in the north of the United Kingdom (UK) was difficult and isolating. This period coincided with the HIV/AIDS crisis and the introduction of Section 28, which made it illegal for local authorities (and therefore schools) to ‘promote homosexuality’ and contributed to a climate of fear, stigma and prejudice toward LGBTQ+ people (Ellis & High, 2004). Homophobic bullying was a daily experience in secondary school, and when I sought support from teachers, I was generally ignored or told I was to blame.

When I came out to my parents in 1993 at the age of seventeen, following years of isolation and feelings of shame, I felt pressure to define my sexuality with a label, perhaps in an attempt to legitimise it. My journey toward self-acceptance was a very solitary experience, and I felt I had no access to support, information or positive LGBTQ+ role models. Deviating from heteronormative expectations felt extreme and dangerous at the time, and I was discouraged from doing so, both directly and indirectly. Despite the risk of further rejection and judgement, I felt a compulsion to live without shame, and believed this was the route to achieving happiness and fulfilment.

Throughout my 15-year-long career as a teacher and later as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), I developed an interest and commitment to supporting vulnerable pupils to thrive. I believe that all children have the right to flourish and achieve, regardless of circumstances or barriers they may face. As a trainee educational psychologist (EP), I have been drawn toward supporting LGBTQ+ adolescents within individual casework and

encouraging schools to develop inclusive practice at a systemic level. I have been keenly interested in understanding the protective factors which support LGBTQ+ individuals to thrive. In doing so, I have been particularly focused on understanding the circumstances which support LGBTQ+ young people to overcome possible feelings of isolation, stigma and shame and establish a sense of strength and resilience.

The current generation arguably benefits from a comparatively liberal society and has much more LGBTQ+ support and visibility than my own adolescence. Deviating from cisnormative and heteronormative expectations feels much more accepted and achievable for young LGBTQ+ people today. However, I realise I belong to a different generation and have sought to maintain objectivity by ensuring my personal experience did not result in bias. I have achieved this through a reflective and reflexive process and by engaging in discussions with my research supervisor, colleagues and peers. A research journal has been another way I have explored my feelings, values and beliefs to help me to reflect upon the possible impact of these preconceptions within the study. A reflective commentary is included within the main text, in addition to reflective boxes which are designed to offer an insight into the reflective process. These boxes have been given blurred edges, to indicate how the reflective process was integral to the research.

The thesis intends to cover the following areas:

- A critical literature review offering an overview of existing research and relevant psychological theory
- The rationale for the methodology of choice and a description of the methods used
- A narrative and interpretive account of the research findings
- Consideration of the findings in relation to key literature
- An evaluation of the research, including research validity, study limitations, implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter aims to present the context and rationale of the study, beginning with a critical review of relevant literature in this area, with consideration given to prevalence and changing cultural attitudes; the impact on CYP; approaches towards supporting LGBTQ+ CYP; the role of education and educational psychology; and relevant legislation within this field. By exploring current literature, opportunities for further research are considered, informing the aims and research questions of this study.

My initial search for literature included the terms 'LGBT', 'sexual identity', 'gender identity', 'mental health' and 'discrimination'. These areas were then expanded to include new considerations within my research, including terms such as 'protective factors', 'sexual and gender minority' and 'queer'. As other authors of potential significance were cited within my reading, I ensured that I explored these opportunities to broaden my understanding while holding a critical stance. My research journal tracked the progress of my reading and ongoing thought process, and I made notes which reflected my journey towards a thorough understanding of the topic. Consideration was given to achieving a balance of international research papers and those originating within the UK since this was the location of my study. A mind map was used extensively throughout this process to organise my ideas into distinct themes and highlight potential gaps in my knowledge.

Through my research, I developed my understanding of this area while acknowledging the breadth of study in this field. I realised that pre-existing research in this area was often focused on either gender identity or sexual orientation. This resulted in difficulty when comparing research findings since some studies were focused purely upon transgender youth and others gay, bisexual and lesbian individuals. Additionally, I felt this potentially omitted young people who may be questioning their sexual and/or gender identity, those who have not 'come out' to others, and more marginalised or overlooked groups. I had also noticed a recent shift towards research focused on the experiences of all sexual and gender identities, which I felt overcame these issues and accounted for the intersectionality of gender and sexual identity.

In my desire to use terminology which was consistent and relevant to this dynamic topic of study, LGBTQ+ was chosen as an inclusive term which purposely included all non-cisnormative and non-heteronormative identities. I chose not to adopt the term ‘gender and sexual minority groups’ since I felt this had the potential to marginalise these groups further. Additionally, since CYP prefer to choose their own terminology when referring to their gender identity or sexual orientation (Bates et al., 2020), I wished to respect this and planned to ask participants how they choose to identify, avoiding the exclusion of young people who might be unsure and those who prefer not to choose a fixed label to define their gender and/or sexual identity.

Defining Terminology

I accepted the assertion that terminology is “constantly being created and reclaimed by members of the LGBTQ+ community to better describe the wealth of experiences we hold” (Koenig, 2019, p. 255). In the interest of supporting the reader, I felt it may be useful to produce an overview of some of the vocabulary used within the current study.

Koenig (2019) suggests that definitions of this kind should be treated with caution since they do not account for the individual nature of language. Therefore, the following table is not an attempt to create an exhaustive or definitive list; it should be considered an aid to the interpretation of the current research.

Table 1

Term	Definition
Bi	An umbrella term used to describe romantic and/or sexual attraction toward more than one gender (Stonewall, 2022).
Bisexual	Sexual, physical, romantic or emotional attraction to both men and women (Koenig, 2019).
Cisgender or Cis	Someone whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (Koenig, 2019).
Cisnormativity	The assumption that everyone is cisgender; the belief that a cisgender identity is the superior gender identity (Koenig, 2019).

'Coming out'	When a person first tells someone/others about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Koenig, 2019).
Deadnaming	Calling someone by their birth name after they have changed their name (Stonewall, 2022).
Gay	A common term for homosexual individuals or groups. Increasingly being used to describe the sexual orientation of any individual to people of the same gender (Koenig, 2019).
Gender expression	How a person chooses to outwardly express their gender, within the context of societal expectations of gender (Stonewall, 2022).
Gender identity	A person's innate sense of their gender, whether male, female or something else, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth (Stonewall, 2022).
Gender reassignment	Another way of describing a person's transition. Can involve medical intervention such as the surgical removal of breast tissue, often described as 'top surgery'. Can also mean changing names, pronouns, dressing differently and living in their self-identified gender (Stonewall, 2022).
Heteronormative	Compliance with culturally determined heterosexual roles and assumptions about heterosexuality as 'natural' or 'normal' (Habarth, 2015).
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, queer (and any other groups in the gender and sexual identity spectrum) (Stonewall, 2022).
Microaggressions	Brief verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, intentional or unintentional, which demonstrate bias toward members of marginalised groups (Nadal, 2018).
Non-binary	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman' (Stonewall, 2022).
Pan/Pansexual	Attraction to all genders or attraction regardless of gender (Gonel, 2013).
Passing	If someone is regarded, at a glance, to be a cisgender man or cisgender woman (Stonewall, 2022).
Queer	A term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Stonewall, 2022).
Sexuality	An individual's sexual drives and interests (Koenig, 2019).
Sexual orientation	A person's enduring sexual, physical, romantic or emotional attraction to other people (Koenig, 2019).
Trans	An umbrella term used to encompass the variety of identities that go beyond gender norms (Koenig, 2019).

Transgender	An identity for a person whose gender/gender identity is different to their sex assigned at birth (Koenig, 2019).
Transitioning	The steps a trans person may take to live in the gender with which they identify (Stonewall, 2022).

Overview of Relevant LGBTQ+ Related Terminology

Theoretical Background

The evolution of terminology used to describe sexuality and gender is explored by Jagose (1996). Jagose describes a break from terminology such as 'homosexual' which was associated with pathologising discourses of medicine, towards terminology characterised by self-identification. This began in the 1960s with the liberationist movement, which challenged perceptions of homosexuality as unnatural or deviant, by annexing the word 'gay' and using it as an empowering term of self-identification (Jagose, 1996).

'Queer' emerged as a self-identifying term of empowerment in the early 1990s, indicating how the semantics of sexuality and gender had continued to evolve. It has been adopted by those seeking to express their dissatisfaction with what they perceive as assimilationist politics and the dominance of gay men within the liberationist movement (Pinar, 2012). A queer model of sexuality, gender and identity is one which "the rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity to other groups" (Duggan, 1992, p. 15).

Queer theory is partly a response to the perceived classism, racism and Eurocentrism of the terms gay and lesbian (Boykin, 1996). It can be summarised as exploring the oppressive power of dominant norms, particularly those relating to sexuality (Butler, 1999). Rather than individual acts of discrimination, oppression can be understood as "those attitudes, behaviours and pervasive and systematic social arrangements by which members of one group are exploited and subordinated while members of another group are granted privileges" (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991, p. 155).

Murray suggests that "gay is a state of mind not of behaviour" (1996, p. 4), which reflects the position that sexual orientation is fluid, fragmented and

dynamic and can evolve throughout someone's life. Queer theorists aim to challenge the ontological position of society (Marcuse, 1974), by challenging patriarchy and its subjugation of sexuality by "intervening in the reproduction of competitive, aggressive men and commodified women" (Pinar, 2012, p. 5). A long overdue need for educational reform is described by Pinar, who argues that "it is past time to correct the repression of queers in the curriculum, especially in history and literature and the arts. It is past time to think out loud what queer pedagogy and queer curriculum might be" (Pinar, 2012, p. 2).

Queer theory challenges the socially constructed concepts of sexuality and gender, although it arguably retains a traditional, binary understanding of gender roles (Hausman, 2001). In response to this criticism, transgender theory incorporates all notions of gender identity and conceptualises gender along a fluid scale. This scale includes both and neither traditional gender roles, which operate irrespective of the biological sex binaries of the human body (Leonard, 2020; Monro, 2001). In contrast to queer theory, transgender theory rejects the idea that transgender individuals are victims of patriarchy (Jones et al., 2016) and instead proposes that gender identity can lead to positive experiences by creating narratives which lie outside of traditional gender norms (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010).

Informed by both queer and transgender theories, I wished to gain an understanding of the significant and meaningful experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents as they navigate heteronormativity and traditional gender roles and seek to express themselves (Fletcher, 2021).

Prevalence of LGBTQ+ Identities

In their most recent study of sexual orientation, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that eight per cent of young adults aged between 16 and 24 years old identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) in 2019 (ONS, 2022). This is described as a growing trend, increasing from four per cent in their 2018 study (ONS, 2021). The study found young adults were most likely to identify as LGB when compared to the population as a whole, with one-third of all those who identified as LGB situated within this age range. The study also notes an increase in those identifying as bisexual among 16-to-24-year-olds, with

individuals more likely to identify as bisexual than other age groups (ONS, 2021). This apparent 'growth' of bisexuality is attributed to young people being more likely than other age groups to explore their sexuality and the social acceptability of what it describes as 'different' sexual identities (ONS, 2021).

Since there are no official records of the number of transgender people in the UK (Hudson-Sharp, 2018), the prevalence of transgender CYP is difficult to assess. However, estimates suggest that one per cent of the population is transgender (Reed et al., 2009). An increase of transgender identifying CYP has been noted in recent years (Bowskill, 2017), illustrated by the dramatic rise in requests for assessment at the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) at the Tavistock and Portman Clinic (a national centre for transgender CYP in the UK). In 2009/10, 91 requests were made to the GIDS, which increased to 2519 in 2017/18 (Bowskill, 2017).

This trend appears to have plateaued more recently. A 0.1 per cent increase in requests for assessment at the GIDS occurred between 2018/19 and 2019/20, when 2,728 referrals were received (The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, n.d.). This coincided with some high-profile legal challenges to the ability of CYP under the age of 16 to give informed consent to the use of puberty-blocking drugs (Brooks, 2022). Currently, there is a two-year waiting list to access the GIDS service, according to an independent review undertaken by NHS England (Cass, 2022). These factors may help to explain the occurrence of this plateau, in addition to the likely impact of COVID-19.

Leonard (2020) proposes that the increasing numbers of referrals to the GIDS over recent years reflects how CYP are openly identifying as transgender from a younger age. This is supported by Kennedy and Hellen (2010), who found the vast majority of transgender youth had questioned their gender identity before moving to secondary school. This study found that many CYP become aware that their biological sex is different from their gender at around four years of age.

Attitudes Towards LGBTQ+ Individuals

Fear during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s reduced the acceptance of LGB individuals in the UK. By 1987, two-thirds of people felt same-sex relationships

were 'always wrong', and 90 per cent believed there was something wrong with same-sex-sexual relations (Pearce et al., 2013). Only 17 per cent of people thought homosexuality was 'not wrong at all' at the time (Pearce et al., 2013).

These attitudes caused many to feel LGB people should be excluded from aspects of everyday life. In 1983 only 41 per cent of people thought it 'acceptable for a homosexual person to be a teacher in a school'. Slightly more (53 per cent) believed it was acceptable for a gay man or lesbian 'to hold a responsible position in public life' (Pearce et al., 2013).

In 2013, the British Social Attitudes Report described a shift toward increasingly liberalised attitudes in the UK, including a change in attitude toward same-sex relationships in the UK (Pearce et al., 2013). This survey found that 22 per cent of people believed same-sex relations were 'always wrong' while 47 per cent felt they were 'not wrong at all'. Eighty-three per cent of people considered it acceptable for a gay man or lesbian to be a teacher, and 90 per cent were comfortable with them holding a position in public life (Pearce et al., 2013).

In 2020, the Equality and Human Rights Commission [EHRC] found that attitudes towards transgender people were broadly positive (Morgan et al., 2020). This study found that 76 per cent of people felt prejudice against transgender people was 'always or mostly wrong', with 82 per cent saying they were not prejudiced towards transgender people at all (Morgan et al., 2020). Around 14 per cent reported that they were a little prejudiced, and two per cent described feeling very prejudiced towards transgender people. These attitudes have remained stable over recent years, with similar figures reported since 2016 (Morgan et al., 2020). Younger age groups hold more positive attitudes toward transgender people, with 54 per cent of 18-to-24-year-olds feeling respect for transgender individuals, compared with just 35 per cent of over 75-year-olds (Morgan et al., 2020).

In 2018, the UK-based LGBTQ+ equality charity Stonewall suggested a link between the widespread visibility of LGBTQ+ people across society and greater general levels of acceptance (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018). However, a reduction in the liberalisation of social attitudes has been noted by the National Centre for Social Research (Curtice et al., 2019). This study found the number of people who believe there is nothing wrong with gay sex has fallen for the first time since the HIV/AIDS crisis, with a third of the population in some way opposed.

The study suggests that a social liberalism plateau may have been reached, describing a small section of society who disapprove of same-sex relationships (Curtice et al., 2019).

Resistance to social liberalism has come from religious and politically conservative groups who have become increasingly active and vocal (Booth, 2019). Booth argues this push-back illustrates that a minority of opponents are becoming increasingly determined to have their socially conservative views discussed in public forums. This has possibly contributed to the recent emergence of the 'gender critical' feminist movement, which is critical of transgender ideology and perceives transgender rights threaten women's 'sex-based' rights (Simon, 2021). This movement downplays the significance of gender and argues that sex is a biological fact which cannot be altered, unlike gender, which is socially constructed and therefore based on feelings (Simon, 2021).

Worthen highlights the role social media has played in this trans exclusionary discourse which has "exploded with conversations about Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists" (TERFs) (2022, p. 2). High-profile TERFs such as J.K Rowling, who are opposed to the recognition of trans women as women, have used their platform to advance the cause of sex essentialism. Worthen describes this phenomenon as "loud voices among a minority who have been successful anti-trans mouthpieces" (2022, p. 1) and suggests this has been used to support further trans exclusion, both within wider society and within the LGBTQ+ community, contributing to a schism between different LGBTQ+ communities. This is visible within the establishment of the LGB Alliance in 2019, which actively opposes the trans-inclusive equality charity Stonewall.

Impact on Children and Young People

The consequences of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying (HBT) have been studied by the charitable sector and the UK government. In 2018, the government explored the impact of HBT bullying on LGBTQ+ identifying people (Government Equalities Office, 2018). It describes the short and long-term effects of HBT bullying, including how it limits a CYP's wish to remain in

school, impacts academic achievement, causes truancy and is connected with elevated rates of suicide.

In 2018, a large scale mental health survey commissioned by Stonewall found that half of all LGBTQ+ people between 18 and 24 years old in the UK had considered suicide within the last year (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018). The study found that seventy percent of LGBTQ+ young people felt that life was not worth living, and twelve per cent shared that they had tried to take their own life during the previous year. Rates of self-harm and depression reported by LGBTQ+ young people are similarly shocking, with half describing incidents of self-harm, two thirds experiencing depression, and thirteen per cent describing regular drug use (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018). This picture is not unique to the UK. A review of international literature in this area found that LGBTQ+ people are much more likely to attempt suicide, experience difficulty with anxiety, suffer from eating disorders or become dependent on drugs or alcohol (Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015).

The stress experienced by LGBTQ+ people as a result of stigma, discrimination, prejudice and victimisation is explored by Meyer (2003). Minority stress theory describes this as a social stress, which is considered an ongoing and persistent experience within social environments (Meyer, 2003). It is suggested that the cumulative impact of this stress can result in mental health difficulties among LGBTQ+ people (Friedman, 1999). It follows that if LGBTQ+ young people are navigating these stressful social environments, that this stress will limit their ability to thrive, since they are unlikely to feel emotionally safe (Pepper & Brill 2008).

Almeida et al. (2009) offer further exploration of the characteristics of this emotional distress, particularly the impact of perceived discrimination among LGBTQ+ individuals. They describe a hostile social context for LGBTQ+ young people, despite acknowledging the positive impact of increased LGBTQ+ visibility and representation. The study argues that deviating from accepted social norms of gender and sexuality results in significant feelings of stress, caused by a perception of societal stigma and hostility. In addition, explicitly negative experiences such as rejection, isolation, discrimination, bullying, abuse and victimisation compound this experience of stress (Almeida et al., 2009). A perceived lack of acceptance within society, and personal experience of HBT behaviour therefore cause LGBTQ+ young people to feel emotionally unsafe.

Feeling unable to disclose gender identity or sexuality, and negative experiences after 'coming out' such as isolation and rejection have been found to be closely associated with poor mental health outcomes such as depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018, Formby, 2013; Grafsky et al., 2018; Steinke et al., 2017). Explicitly HBT bullying and victimisation is considered a key component of self-harming behaviours (Lucassen & Burford, 2015). These findings support the suggestion that the stress associated with identifying as LGBTQ+ results in an increased likelihood of poorer mental health.

Supporting LGBTQ+ Children and Young People

Factors which support and protect the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth are explored by Wilson and Cariola (2020) in their systematic review of qualitative research in this area. They highlight the role of support within school and social environments, particularly access to peer groups and a 'safe space' to meet.

School-based LGBTQ+ inclusive clubs and societies provide a sense of safety, solidarity and friendship, and are important sources of support for many young people (Russell et al., 2009), and may help to reduce rates of school absenteeism (Greytak et al., 2013). These spaces are considered vital to the well-being of LGBTQ+ young people (Russell et al., 2009; Steinke et al., 2017), and could be considered alternative attachment groups. This is supported by Bowlby (1982), who describes how attachment shifts from family members to peers and other social groups during adolescence.

LGBTQ+ inclusive clubs and societies have also been linked with improved academic performance, enhanced feelings of connectedness to school and an improved sense of physical and emotional safety, thereby lessening some of the adverse effects of marginalisation and improving mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ young people (Marx & Kettrey, 2016). Steinke et al. (2017) found that online LGBTQ+ community groups could replicate this sense of community, and provide access to information and mental health support, which is considered especially important for those who are geographically isolated, not supported by family members or not 'out'.

Hatzenbuehler et al. (2014) suggest a link between protective school climates and reduced rates of suicide among LGBTQ+ individuals. The importance of LGBTQ+ inclusive school policy is explored by Wilson and Cariola (2020), who suggest they contribute to the creation of safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ youth. This is achieved by tackling HBT language, bullying and behaviour, developing inclusive practices such as non-gender specific uniform and extra-curricular events, offering gender-neutral toilet facilities, and staff training which seeks to explore and challenge cisgender norms (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017).

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics within the curriculum is a powerful way of promoting and recognising diversity, especially within the subjects of health, humanities and history (Formby, 2013). An LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum for relationships and sex education (RSE) was introduced to the UK in 2019. This includes teaching about significant LGBTQ+ people and themes. Formby hopes this will help to overcome a noted disparity between the visibility of LGBTQ+ young people in schools and the taboo nature of LGBTQ+ topics.

Acceptance from parents and family is a key indicator of mental health for LGBTQ+ CYP (Grafsky et al., 2018). Supportive and caring relationships offer the young person a sense of understanding and connection, which is described as an invaluable resource by Porta et al. (2017). This enables them to overcome the sense of isolation they are likely to experience in a heteronormative culture. Feeling accepted and valued at home supports LGBTQ+ CYP to 'come out' to others, protects against poor mental health, enhances self-esteem and improves general health in the longer term (Ryan et al., 2010). Access to a supportive adult in school results in a more positive educational experience for transgender adolescents (Goodrich, 2012). These relationships provide a sense of connectedness and enhance feelings of well-being and emotional resilience, which are particularly important in the development of personal identity (DiFulvio, 2011).

Travers et al. (2020) argue that social support may overcome the detrimental effects of minority stress for LGBTQ+ youth (Meyer, 2003). Access to supportive family, friends or partners is a predictor of greater self-esteem and lower levels of depression (Spencer & Patrick, 2009). Some suggest this buffering effect against trauma to be most significant from family members, in

comparison to the support offered by friends or a partner (Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Travers et al., 2020).

The Role of the Educational Psychologist

The EP is uniquely situated to support schools as they seek the best possible outcomes for LGBTQ+ CYP, since they are able to introduce a psychological perspective to any discussion. According to the British Psychological Society (BPS), eliciting the voice of CYP is a key role of the EP, and this is an important element of the report writing and the statutory assessment process (BPS, 2015). A range of methods are used to explore the wishes and views of CYP, from a non-judgemental position, including therapeutic approaches, discussion, task-related activities and indirect methods. The choice of these methods vary, according to the individual needs of the CYP themselves (Harding & Atkinson, 2009).

“A child cannot feel emotionally safe, and will most likely experience problems in learning, if they regularly experience discrimination at school” (Pepper & Brill, 2008, pp. 53-54). Schools have the capacity to develop a positive culture and a safe learning environment for LGBTQ+ young people through the development of school-wide policy which enables teachers to address existing stigma and ignorance (Luecke, 2011; Payne & Smith, 2011). Teachers can promote a culture of inclusion by intervening after HBT bullying incidents and helping to forge a culture of acceptance and safety (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).

The impact of LGBTQ+ themed staff development is highlighted by Swanson and Gettinger (2016). This study found staff development contributes to more positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ CYP in the short-term, and has the ability to affect teachers’ attitudes and behaviours in the longer-term. Without this opportunity, there is a danger that a limited understanding of sexuality and gender identity causes some teachers to feel that that these subjects are taboo and inappropriate topics of conversation in schools (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). Unfortunately, parents often find they need to educate teachers on sexual or gender diversity as they attempt to advocate for their LGBTQ+ child, which adds to the pressure parents are already likely to feel in the circumstances (Bartholomaeus & Riggs (2017).

Supporting the development of good practice through inclusive policy development is a key role of the EP (BPS, 2022). Lowe (2020) suggests this is particularly relevant for trans CYP, and describes how school-wide LGBTQ+ inclusive policy can contribute to the creation of a supportive and nurturing environment. Yavuz (2016) describes how EPs can support school staff to discuss gender identity and theory, consider the impact of HBT bullying and discrimination, explore the potential impact of transitioning on a CYP's mental health and develop robust inclusion policies.

The Rights of LGBTQ+ Young People

The rights of children and young people under 18 years old are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). These rights are described within 54 Articles, with many relevant for CYP who identify as LGBTQ+. Children have a right to non-discrimination (Article 2); a right to identity (Article 8); a right to express their views in matters which affect them (Article 12); a right to freedom of expression (Article 13); a right to privacy (Article 16); a right to protection from violence (Article 19) and a right to health (Article 24).

A key concern for LGBTQ+ CYP is the right to be who you are and to choose your identity (Sandberg, 2015). Sandberg defines this as the right to self-determination, the right to not have a sexual orientation imposed on you and the freedom to choose who to disclose your identity. For those experiencing HBT bullying, this is an obstacle to their right to education regardless of who they are, outlined in Article 28 (Cornu, 2016). The UNCRC therefore protects LGBTQ+ CYP from discrimination concerning identity and expression.

Self-determination protects the rights of trans and intersex CYP to choose their gender identity. The right to access medical treatment is protected within Article 24, which is most relevant to transgender CYP. This also protects intersex children from medical intervention before they are able to express their views (Sandberg, 2015).

Further protection for LGBTQ+ CYP is offered by Articles 8, 10 and 14 of the Human Rights Act [HRA] (1998). This includes the 'right to respect', 'freedom of expression' and freedom from the fear of discrimination. The HRA ensures

equal access to protection, regardless of sexual orientation and brings 16 of the human rights from the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. Stonewall considers the HRA to have been a cornerstone to the development of LGBT equality in the UK since 1998 (Stonewall, 2018).

The primary source of equality law in the UK is arguably the Equality Act [EA] (2010). It offers legal protection from all forms of discrimination for LGBTQ+ people, with sexual orientation and gender reassignment status being identified as protected characteristics. The Act offers legal protection from educational settings to “discriminate against, harass or victimise a pupil or potential pupil in relation to admissions, inclusion and the provision of available facilities” (EA, 2010). In 2020, a landmark court ruling meant that non-binary and gender fluid people were offered legal protection within the EA, by accepting that these individuals fall under the gender reassignment category (Wareham, 2020).

The Gender Recognition Act [GRA] (2004) offers protection for trans CYP, by giving them the right to be legally recognised. It enables trans young people over 18 to amend their birth certificate to reflect their identified gender and obtain a Gender Recognition Certificate. Reformation of the GRA is being proposed by Stonewall (2020), to reduce the age of gender recognition to 16, recognise non-binary gender identities and allow transgender people to self-declare. This would represent a shift towards a de-medicalised and self-determined system for gender recognition.

Further legislation is needed to protect CYP from so-called ‘conversion therapy’, which is designed to change or ‘cure’ a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation. In 2018, Stonewall reported that twenty per cent of trans young people between 18 to 24 have been pressured to question or change their gender identity when accessing healthcare services and five per cent have been pressured to change their sexual orientation (Bachman & Gooch, 2018). The government has said it is “committed to banning this coercive and abhorrent practice” by introducing new legislation designed to protect LGBT people (Government Equalities Office, 2021, para. 10), although this is arguably already long overdue.

Research which Engages with LGBTQ+ Young People

Historically, services which seek to support marginalised CYP have been predominantly prevention and risk-focused (Wagaman, 2015). This approach accepts that LGBTQ+ CYP must adapt to their environment rather than how they might seek to bring about change by shaping it for themselves:

To adequately address the systemic issues facing LGBTQ young people, and to develop programs and interventions to most effectively meet their needs, young people themselves must be in positions to give voice to their concerns and engage with those in power (Wagaman, 2015, p. 125).

The right of CYP to be involved and express their views relating to subjects which affect them has been outlined by the UNRC (United Nations, 1989). Involving CYP in decisions which are being made about them has been found to positively affect their well-being, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Hall, 2010). Giving CYP a voice gives them the power to effect change, which contrasts with the notion of 'silence' often associated with marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ (Hadfield & Haw, 2001). According to Clark (2010), qualitative research is empowering for CYP since it gives them the implicit opportunity to inform change, which can result in feelings of personal and political empowerment.

In their systematic review of qualitative research into the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth, Wilson and Cariola (2020) describe the need for future research which gives LGBTQ+ CYP a voice. The nature of qualitative research means the participant's voice is highlighted since it seeks to provide insight into their thoughts and feelings. Analysis of these themes means that the researcher can offer meaning and understanding (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Qualitative research with the LGBTQ+ CYP themselves, therefore, can provide valuable and unique insights into the lived experience: "Probably the most reasonable person to ask is the person themselves" – participant 3 (Bowskill, 2017, p. 103). Despite this, many LGBTQ+ groups have not had many opportunities to engage with research, notably transgender CYP (Bowskill, 2017). Seeking a sense of equity of voice across all LGBTQ+ groups was an important consideration as I moved forward with my research.

Summary and Research Aims

A need for further research which seeks to understand the role of the internet in supporting LGBTQ+ young people was identified by Wilson and Cariola in 2020. This systematic review of qualitative research highlights the importance of understanding how the internet functions as a source of information and support, and how it is used by LGBTQ+ CYP to achieve a sense of connectedness and acceptance. They emphasise a need for more positively focused and strength-based research in this area, so that the characteristics of these protective factors can be explored. In doing so, it is suggested that “the ecological, psychosocial and cognitive characteristics of young LGBTQI+ people who are leading happy, well-adjusted lives within their microsystems and macrosystems” can be better understood (Wilson & Cariola, 2020, p. 206), and future support for the wider LGBTQ+ community can be enhanced.

Higa et al. (2014) also describe how existing research which attempts to explore the well-being of LGBTQ+ CYP is largely focused on problems and difficulties rather than describing the characteristics of support. They recommend that future research is ideally situated to adopt a contextual approach, which explores the role played by home and school, informed by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1992). It is hoped that by considering how these different systems affect LGBTQ+ adolescents, this will contribute to a greater understanding of how these interconnected systems influence the well-being of LGBTQ+ CYP.

In their exploration of the risk and protective factors of mental health among LGB individuals, Travers et al. (2020) propose that future research in this field should aim to include all individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ (the inclusive umbrella acronym), rather than selectively focusing on some identities. This study suggests that some potential participants may feel unwilling or unable to take part in research if there is a need to disclose their identity, which could feel exposing and unsafe. It is hoped that by removing this requirement for participants to disclose their sexual or gender identity will enhance this study, since this could be a potential barrier to involvement. In addition, since adolescents are less likely to have a fixed understanding of their own gender and sexual identity, it is anticipated that this will enhance the validity of the current study.

Informed by these research recommendations and wishing to contribute meaningfully to this field of study, I developed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents perceive their noteworthy experiences of themselves in relation to others?

RQ2: How do LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents experience support at school, online and at home?

RQ3: What can educational psychologists learn about supporting LGBTQ+ CYP from the perceived experiences of adolescents in this group?

Reflective Box:

The research questions were developed and refined through discussion and reflection with my research supervisor and colleagues. Although the research aim remained the same, I wished to avoid the use of negative terminology such as 'marginalisation', which I felt might influence the direction of the interviews and analysis process.

In seeking to explore the 'noteworthy experiences' of the participants, it was left to the participants themselves to decide what was a noteworthy topic or subject. 'Noteworthy' was considered a synonym for significant, meaningful or important events in the participants' lives, in relation to their LGBTQ+ identity. I intended to encourage participants to talk about whichever experience they chose and what they perceived to be important, significant or personally meaningful. Through the analysis process, the shared characteristics of these experiences would be identified and the common features of the noteworthy experiences would be considered.

Since I was particularly interested in exploring the protective and supportive factors for LGBTQ+ adolescents, this informed the wording of the questions I developed. Although I would not be attempting to direct the topics and experiences described by participants, this was a particular area of interest, informed by my knowledge of previous research in this field which had highlighted a need for a more strength-based approach.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

The previous chapter explored the literature related to the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. It highlighted the importance of exploring individual experience to develop understanding of how to support these CYP effectively. This literature led to the development of a research rationale that informed the previously outlined research questions.

In this chapter, I will outline my position as a researcher and describe how this has influenced my methodological decisions. I will discuss my methodological approach, including the research design, procedures and ethical considerations.

My Positionality

Research paradigms can be defined as “basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). Within the research process, I sought to adopt a research paradigm which was true to my beliefs in relation to the chosen ontology (the form and nature of reality), epistemology (the relationship between the knower and what can be known), methodology (how the researcher finds out what can be known) and axiology (the nature of ethics) (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). By doing so, I hoped that coherence, logic and consistency would be maintained within the research.

Since I felt the research was focused on how people make sense of what has happened and what meaning they give to that experience, a qualitative approach was adopted (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006). Qualitative research is “genuinely interested in novel insights and new understandings...of complex and social psychological processes” (Willig, 2013, p. 158). This definition, and my desire to collect rich data informed my selection of a qualitative approach.

Three fundamental concepts which form the basis of qualitative research within the social sciences are described by Carter and Little (2007). The first of these is the researcher’s epistemological stance, which is of fundamental importance

since it informs the approach taken (methodology), and justifies the techniques used (method) (Carter & Little, 2007). Understanding that epistemology is concerned with the 'theory of knowledge' (Thomas, 2009), I sought to answer questions such as 'What is the nature of knowledge?' and 'How is knowledge produced?' (Willig, 2013).

Ontology

Since the epistemological stance of a researcher is directly connected to their ontological position, this should be clearly stated (Mantzoukas, 2004). Willig describes ontology as being concerned with the nature of the world, driven by the question 'What is there to know?' (Willig, 2013). Unlike realist positions which suggest a cause-effect relationship between structures and objects in the world, I adopted a relativist stance (Willig, 2013). I was, therefore, not seeking to produce a 'true' account of the participants' experiences as LGBTQ+ adolescents and attempting to match these to an external 'reality'. I consider 'reality' to be relative and not 'out-there' and sought to understand how LGBTQ+ adolescents perceive and interpret their experiences from a subjective standpoint (Willig, 2013).

Epistemology

An epistemological continuum is described by Madill et al. (2000), who identify three different epistemological positions. At one end of this continuum is the realist perspective, which considers knowledge to be pre-existing and seeks to discover this through objective and detached methods (Madill et al., 2000). The polar opposite of this is the radical constructionist perspective, which argues that knowledge is a social construction and rejects the idea of any knowledge existing outside of language (Madill et al., 2000). A contextual constructionist perspective lies between these two poles, which is the stance I have taken within the current research.

Unlike the realist perspective (which seeks to view knowledge from the position of a passive bystander), the contextual constructionist perspective argues that people take an active role in constructing their understandings (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). Since people are continually embedded within their context, all knowledge is considered to be context-bound, perspectival and standpoint-dependent (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). Consequently, knowledge can be regarded as relative and provisional, with the same phenomena being

understood in different ways, depending on the person's unique perspective (Madill et al., 2000). Understanding individual points of view can be the subject of research which holds this perspective. However, knowledge is seen as context-dependent and, therefore, unique to the time, place and person (Larkin, et al., 2006). It follows that research findings are variable and depend upon the context of data gathering and analysis (Madill et al., 2000). Since the researcher is part of this context and plays an active role in knowledge discovery and construction, they are implicated in the research process (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988; Willig, 2013).

Theoretical Perspective

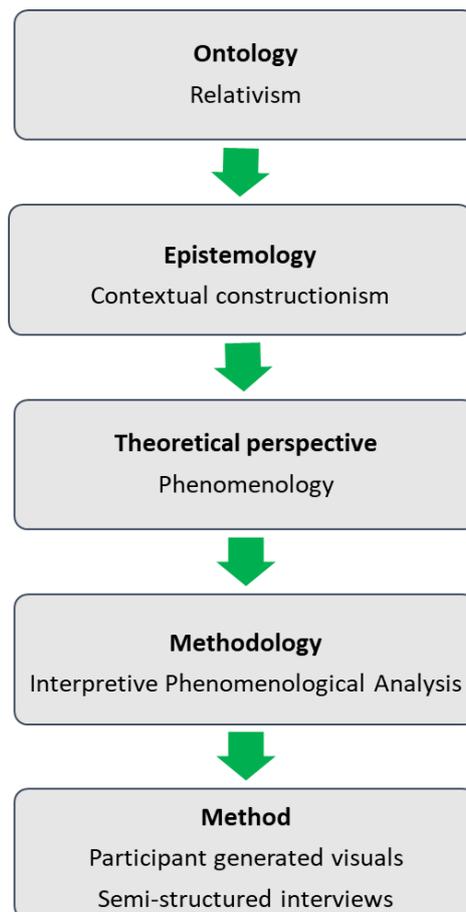
Accepting that I was focused on understanding what the lived experience of individuals is like, I located the research within a phenomenological approach. I focused my inquiry on developing my understanding of how LGBTQ+ adolescents make sense of their reality through a process of reflection about significant experiences I hoped to engage with. In endeavouring to understand how individuals come to understand their experiences, I would seek to identify their essential qualities (Smith et al., 2009).

My belief that human beings are 'sense-making' creatures who seek to find meaning in their experiences led to my exploration of research methods that emphasise the process of interpretation. I understood that by asking participants to reflect on their experiences, I would be engaged in a dual role and involved in many of the same processes as the participants. My position as researcher would not be distant; I would seek to make sense of the participants' accounts by "entering their world" (Smith, 2015, p. 29).

The resulting research was, therefore, oriented toward developing an in-depth understanding of what it is 'like' for LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents as they make sense of what is happening to them (Willig, 2013). I sought to offer insight into the experiences of each participant, in a group of young people with shared characteristics, in this case, self-identifying as LGBTQ+.

The methodological approach selected for this research is discussed in depth later in this chapter; the following diagram summarises the approach taken.

Figure 1



Summary of Philosophical Foundations of the Study

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The methodological approach implemented in this research was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach was developed in response to frustrations caused by the dominance of quantitative methods in psychological research (Smith, 1996). IPA is a specific research methodology that seeks to enhance research and add to psychological knowledge (Smith, 1996). IPA is an approach “dedicated to the detailed exploration of personal meaning and lived experience” (Smith, 2015, p. 25). IPA aims to explore how participants make sense of their personal and social world, specifically focusing on the meaning that these experiences hold for these individuals (Smith, 2015). It involves a detailed examination of the participants’ lived experience through a focus on their perception or account of an event (Smith, 2015). This approach is based

on the premise that people are actively engaged in the world and continually reflect upon their experiences in order to understand them (Smith et al., 2009).

A researcher undertaking research with an IPA approach seeks to “see things in their own terms” (Smith, 2015, p. 26) instead of being shaped by preconceived hypotheses or notions. Therefore, IPA researchers need to first listen intently to what is shared by the participants to gain an ‘insider’s perspective’ of the phenomenon being studied (Larkin et al., 2006). Following this, they interpret these accounts to develop an understanding of what it means to have those concerns in that particular context (Larkin et al., 2006).

IPA has a philosophical foundation and is informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). To examine the focus and aims of IPA, I will consider each of these areas.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology can be described as a philosophical approach to the study of experience (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl is considered the founder of the phenomenological approach (Larkin et al., 2011). He suggested that phenomenological inquiry has the potential to identify the essential features of an experience that would effectively transcend its particular circumstances (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl proposed that this methodological approach can illuminate the experience for others through a process of focusing on everything in its own right, with depth and rigour (Husserl 1936/70). By adopting a phenomenological approach, I was focused on subjective experiences and sought to understand how individuals made sense of them.

Phenomenology seeks to identify the core structures and features of human experience through a method whereby an assumed understanding of the world is ‘put to one side’ in order to concentrate on how things are perceived, remembered, judged, thought and valued within a process known as ‘bracketing’ (Husserl, 1936/1970). By removing assumptions and preconceptions, a focus on the essence of the experience itself is possible, and the perceptual experience can be understood (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl’s approach to understanding the conscious experience: describing it in terms of its particular and essential features, has influenced the development of phenomenological psychology by setting the agenda for a systematic and

attentive examination of the content of consciousness or lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is informed by Husserl's work: both focus on the process of reflection, and the idea of 'bracketing' is an important part of the IPA research process. Whereas Husserl was concerned with the essence of experience, IPA attempts to capture "particular experiences for particular people" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16).

Heidegger proposed a less theoretical and abstract approach to phenomenological inquiry (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Like Husserl, Heidegger grounded his stance in the lived world, but he was primarily concerned with the question of existence itself (Smith et al., 2009). His work focused on the conceptual basis of existence from a deliberately 'worldly' perspective where the individual cannot be removed or separated from the objects, language and culture surrounding them. Therefore, according to Heidegger, our engagement in the world is shared, overlapping and relational, and this intersubjectivity is key to how we communicate and make sense of each other (Larkin et al., 2006).

IPA inquiry accepts Heidegger's view and considers that all human experience is perspectival, temporal and in relation to something else (Smith et al., 2009). As a result, phenomenological inquiry is primarily focused on the interpretation of an individual's meaning-making activities (Smith et al., 2009). This contextualised approach is echoed by Merleau-Ponty (1962), who describes the embodied nature of our relationship to the world which informs our individual perspective. As such, "the body [is] no longer conceived as an object in the world, but as our means of communication with it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 106). In other words, although we can observe and experience an emotion for another person, we cannot entirely share their experience because it belongs to their own position in the world (Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty, therefore, considers the physical and perceptual qualities of individual experience to be more important than the abstract or logical ones (Anderson, 2003).

Sartre proposed that the process of meaning-making is an action-oriented process which engages with the world in which the individual lives (Sartre & Richmond, 1956). He considered the 'self' to be an ongoing project rather than a pre-existing entity to be discovered. This view proposes that an individual is in

a “constant process of becoming” (Kierkegaard, 1974, p. 79). An individual’s perception of the world is primarily shaped by the presence of others, according to Sartre, since interacting with others is inevitable (Sartre & Richmond, 1956). He suggests that the act of sharing the world with others means that our experience and perception of it are altered. Relationships with others, or their absence, impact how we conceive of our experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

According to phenomenological philosophy, experience and perception and how an individual is embedded and immersed within the world (their objects, language, culture, relationships and projects) contribute to fully understanding an individual (Smith et al., 2009). This interpretive perspective focuses on the person’s unique involvement within their world and their interactions and relationships with others in it (Smith et al., 2009). IPA considers ‘experience’ to be a lived process unique to that person’s relationship with their world. While understanding the philosophical basis of IPA is important, it may be helpful to think of the philosopher as describing a “live dynamic activity” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 33) and formalising an approach and ability which is fundamentally human. Therefore, the current research seeks to understand people’s relationship to the world and interpret how they attempt to make meaning out of their activities.

Hermeneutics

Since IPA is concerned with interpretation, it is informed by hermeneutics. Hermeneutics can be described as the theory of interpretation (Smith, 2015) and offers important theoretical insights for IPA. Hermeneutics was initially developed to provide a foundation for the interpretation of biblical texts but later evolved as a philosophical underpinning for a broader range of texts (Smith, 2015). Three significant contributors to the area of hermeneutics are Heidegger, Gadamer and Schleiermacher. Smith et al. (2009) highlight the need for psychological researchers to be conscious of the fact that other concerns inform hermeneutics and to take care when considering its relevance.

Heidegger (1927/1962) proposes the case for a hermeneutic phenomenology through the concept of ‘dasein’. Dasein encompasses the idea that our engagement with the world and understanding of it is always accessed through interpretation, which is informed by our previous experiences, assumptions and preconceptions (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Heidegger argues that “an interpretation

is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us” (1962, p. 191).

The IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic, in which they are “trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, 2011, p. 10). Smith describes this as a complex endeavour which requires the researcher to be highly involved (Smith, 2011). Gadamer emphasises the need for any researcher to be self-aware so that a transcript can “assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings” (1960, p. 238). He encourages an ongoing reflexive and reflective approach, which enables the researcher to respond to preconceptions that only reveal themselves during the process, as well as those which are evident from the start. In response to this, engaging in reflective and reflexive thinking was important throughout the design, research and analytic process.

Schleiermacher (1998) describes interpretation as involving two separate processes: a grammatical interpretation (the exact and objective textual meaning) and a psychological interpretation (the individuality of the author). He argues that the unique techniques and intentions of the writer influence the meaning of the text they produce and describes interpretation as an intuitive craft which involves a range of skills (Smith et al., 2009).

According to Schleiermacher, the analytic process can subsume the explicit claims of the participants since the researcher offers a different perspective, which gives it an added value (Smith et al., 2009). IPA research achieves this added value through systematic and detailed analysis, drawing connections, looking across cases and considering psychological theory (Smith et al., 2009). For Schleiermacher, this interpretive process depends upon the analyst sharing some common ground with the person being interpreted (Smith et al., 2009). Gadamer (1960) took a different position, suggesting that the central aim of interpretation is to understand the meaning of the text rather than understand the person. He is sceptical of the ability of the researcher to recreate the intention of the author because of the gap in time and proposes that interpretation should be considered “a dialogue between past and present” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 27).

Two approaches to interpretation are described by Ricoeur (1970); a hermeneutics of empathy and a hermeneutics of suspicion. Empathy-driven

approaches seek to gain an insider's perspective so that they can derive meaning from an experience described by a participant (Smith et al., 2009). This is achieved by engaging with the data to gain a better understanding (Willig, 2013). In comparison, an approach driven by suspicion involves examining the participant's account for hidden meaning through the use of pre-existing theoretical concepts which are used to guide the interpretive process (Willig, 2013). Smith et al. (2009) propose that IPA goes beyond the hermeneutics of empathy, by incorporating a hermeneutic of questioning. In addition to 'standing in the participant's shoes', they argue that IPA researchers are able to 'stand alongside' the participant to ask questions and make sense of their accounts. I felt this position was compatible with the approach I would be taking within this research. Therefore, I considered connections to theoretical concepts after I had completed the analysis process.

Smith et al. (2009) consider the hermeneutic circle possibly the most significant idea within hermeneutic theory. The dynamic relationship between the part and the whole is central to this concept. To understand an individual part, one must look at the whole; to understand the whole, you must look at the parts (Smith et al., 2009). This describes a dynamic and non-linear approach which supports the interpretation of text at a number of different levels. For an IPA researcher, this means that the analysis process is always iterative. This allows them to move back and forth between different ways of thinking about the data rather than being preoccupied with completing each step and moving forwards in a linear way (Smith et al., 2009). This means that the researcher develops a shifting relationship with the data since their understanding of it evolves as they shift between part and whole, and their perspective alters.

Idiography

Smith et al. (2009) describe the nomothetic research domain as problematic since it reduces individuals to group averages. Rather than being nomothetic and seeking to make generalisable claims about human behaviour, IPA is concerned with the particular and is, therefore, idiographic in nature (Smith et al., 2009).

Unlike nomothetic research, IPA aims to comprehend the meaning of something for a given individual by focusing on individual perspectives and experiences. Smith et al. (2009) describe how idiography influences IPA in two distinct ways.

First, IPA's sense of detail and focus on the particular means that the analysis process must be thorough and systematic. Second, since IPA seeks to understand how an event, process or relationship has been understood from a particular perspective and context, samples should be small, "purposefully-selected and carefully-situated" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). Although Smith highlights the value of single case IPA analysis, the authors outline how most IPA researchers achieve the idiographic element of their research by carrying out an individual analysis of each case before searching for areas of convergence and divergence (Smith, 2011). This was my intention with the current research, and my idiographic commitment is demonstrated within the analysis, which contains transcript extracts designed to illustrate the individual experience.

This focus on the particular means that IPA does not attempt to and cannot produce generalisable claims. It is concerned with 'theoretical generalisability' and requires the reader to actively consider the applicability of the findings within their own field (Smith et al., 2009). The current study, therefore, seeks to increase understanding and contribute to existing research in this area.

The Rationale for Selecting IPA

I feel IPA is the suitable methodology for this study for various reasons. While the approach is recently developed and has roots within health psychology, its use is rapidly growing within counselling, social and clinical psychology (Smith, 2004). Despite a "conspicuous absence of peer-reviewed educational psychology articles relating to IPA" (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011, p. 756), it is argued that this should be considered an opportunity by educational researchers rather than being considered a deterrent (Goodall, 2014).

In his review of IPA methodology within educational research, Noon concludes that it has the capacity to be a powerful research tool and suggests that the findings of IPA studies "can contribute in assisting educationalists in shaping future policy and practice around the needs and expectations of both students and educators" (2018, p. 82). This depends upon the researcher's interview skills, citing "active listening, empathy and the ability to build trust and rapport as crucial to the production of rich data" (Noon, 2018, p. 76). I felt that my

previous experience as a SENCO and training as an educational psychologist had supported the development of these skills.

The suitability of IPA within LGBTQ+ focused research is examined by Chan and Farmer (2017). They propose that the ideographic approach of IPA allows the researcher to treat a participant's lived experience with value and meaning by recognising their individuality. In doing so, they argue that this gives voice and value to uniquely nuanced LGBTQ+ identities. Chan and Farmer describe this as "especially vital given the evolution of identities exemplifying the LGBTQEQ+ communities through nonheteronormative and noncisnormative representations" (p. 287), referring to the expansion of gender-diverse and non-binary identities.

This position is congruent with queer theory, which seeks to embrace the nuances inherent within LGBTQ+ identities and values the diversity within and between them, rather than subjugating already marginalised groups based on their intersections, such as gender identity or sexual orientation (Lugg & Murphy, 2014). In response, I recruited participants from all LGBTQ+ identities rather than focusing my research on one subsection of the wider LGBTQ+ community (thereby further marginalising other groups through their omission). I would argue that this supports a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon, as described by Callary et al. (2015).

This study aims to explore lived experience. Nevertheless, I understand IPA is only one phenomenological research methodology. In selecting IPA as the specific methodology of choice, I was guided by the interpretive role of myself as researcher within this approach. A descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 1992) aims to describe phenomena and capture the underlying structure of an experience rather than interpret it. This method did not seem to complement my research aims, and I selected IPA, which acknowledges the central role played by the researcher in the interpretive process.

In addition, IPA relies upon the researcher sharing common ground with the participant (Smith et al., 2009). As a gay person, I feel a strong connection to the LGBTQ+ community and felt this would offer additional insight and connection to the participants' lived experience. I felt this would be advantageous within the sense-making process, supported by a reflexive

approach that acknowledges my interpretive role while endeavouring to bracket my preconceptions (Willig, 2013).

Grounded theory aims to develop a theoretical account of a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Unlike IPA, which has an idiographic focus, grounded theory focuses on social processes and encourages focus at the group level (Willig, 2013). According to Smith et al. “an IPA study is more likely to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of a small number of participants” than grounded theory (2009, p. 202). Since I was concerned with exploring the individual experience in depth, I felt IPA was the most appropriate methodological choice.

IPA offers a comprehensive guide to researchers undertaking the analysis process, with several distinct steps and stages (Smith et al., 2009). I found this guidance a valuable and reassuring source of support while also feeling comforted by the flexibility of approach possible within IPA research. I was, therefore, able to adhere to the underpinning principles of the cyclical, interactive process more dynamically than other linear approaches would allow. I felt that I had the personal qualities and skills needed to immerse myself in these intensely personal experiences and commit to a “systematic and meticulous analysis of accounts” (Noon, 2018, p. 82) while consciously reflecting upon my role within it.

Limitations of IPA

According to Willig (2013), IPA has several practical and conceptual limitations. Willig argues that phenomenological data collection methods rely upon the participant’s ability to articulate potentially complex thoughts, feelings and experiences effectively. This criticism is centred upon the presupposition IPA researchers make “that language provides participants with the necessary tools to capture that experience” (Willig, 2013, p. 94). It is argued that IPA relies upon the representational validity of language. In addition, Smith et al. pose the idea that “our interpretations of experience are always shaped, limited and enabled by language (2009, p. 194).

This is perhaps a limitation of language itself, which may create barriers to being fully able to share our unique lived experience (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988).

Partly in response to this criticism, I included visual methods within the research design that would support the participants in articulating their lived experience within semi-structured interviews. Therefore, I hoped to obtain rich linguistic data by encouraging participants to talk in detail about the topics they had visually portrayed. I felt this process would help me to understand how the participants made sense of their experiences (Willig, 2013).

According to Brocki and Wearden (2006), the researcher's ability to interpret, reflect and make sense of the data is a potentially constraining influence within IPA research. It is argued that the active role played by the researcher within the analysis process is a potentially limiting influence within IPA research. Although this suggestion was concerning as a moderately novice researcher, I felt the comprehensive guidelines relating to the interpretive process offered by Smith et al. (2009) went some way to mitigate this.

Additional criticisms of IPA are centred upon how it describes lived experience but does not attempt to explain it (Willig, 2013). In seeking to understand how participants experience and perceive the world from their perspective, IPA is unable to make claims about the nature of the world itself. Willig suggests that this focus on appearance is limiting since it does not seek to understand the cause or origin of phenomena. It is argued that focusing purely on perceptions of an experience distorts our understanding of a phenomenon and limits our ability to explain it (Willig, 2013). In contrast, Osborn and Smith (2008) suggest a direct link between how people talk about their experiences and their thoughts and feelings about these events. Therefore, IPA examines the language used by participants to understand how they are making sense of their reality (Smith, 2011).

Procedures

Ethical Considerations

Since this study was focused on gender identity and sexual orientation, the research topic I was exploring was considered 'highly sensitive'. The nature of the research meant I would meet potentially vulnerable young people. Participants were considered vulnerable since they were below the age of 18 and part of a marginalised group. Because of these considerations, potential

participants could not be approached without the initial consent of their parents (BPS, 2021). This created a tension between the desire to protect vulnerable young people from the possibility of harm while also seeking to engage them in research as autonomous and competent individuals (Aldridge, 2016).

The dynamics of power and its potential impact were an ongoing consideration within this research. A review of the ethical issues associated with conducting research with CYP was conducted by Kirk (2007). Kirk highlights the importance of considering the unequal power relationship between adult researchers, parents and child participants. He suggests that while parents may act as protectors of their children, they may also coerce or deny them the opportunity of participating in research. Considering this, I was attuned to this possibility throughout the recruitment and research process. The impact of power imbalances between myself and the participants was further reduced with the use of collage as a creative and engaging approach. I felt this would support active participation and offer the maximum opportunity for participants to share their experiences using child-friendly methods (Kirk, 2007).

Full ethical approval in line with the University procedures was gained prior to the commencement of the research (see Appendix 4).

Participant Well-Being

One criterion for participation was that individuals should be accessing support from professional agencies. This was included to reduce the potential for psychological harm participants may experience as they took part in the project. Since the nature of the study meant that I was asking participants to reflect on and explore events in their lives which may have felt difficult and upsetting, I needed to consider the potential for heightened emotion or disclosures they might make about current experiences. Therefore, if participants became distressed or required support, they could be signposted to speak with key-workers they already knew and trusted. Should any participant make a disclosure relating to their current situation, I explained that I would need to pass this on to the gatekeeper of the support group so they could follow their own safeguarding procedures.

Throughout the research process, I remained sensitive to signs indicating the participants may be experiencing distress. Although it could be suggested that a degree of discomfort might be expected when discussing difficult events, it has

been found that participants who experience distress rarely regret participation (Draucker et al., 2009). I recognised my duty as researcher to protect participants from harm and minimise the risk of negative emotional effects while supporting them to achieve the greatest benefit from their involvement. I did this by explaining the potential benefits and risks of taking part at the consent stage and encouraging participants to consider and describe their emotional well-being at the end of each session within a debriefing conversation. Throughout, I remained attuned to signs the participants may be experiencing distress, such as head dropping, decreasing eye contact and movement in the seat (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014).

Participants were asked to confirm their ongoing consent within each session and reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any point. Following the research process, they were encouraged to consider the impact of their research involvement and offer feedback about their research experience during a debrief conversation.

Sample

Smith (2015) advocates for a small sample size within IPA research due to the need to explore the perceptions and understandings of participants in detail. Since the study aimed to focus on detail rather than make general claims, between three and six participants were planned, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009). I felt this would enable me to develop a connection with the participants as I explored their interpretation of their meaningful experiences.

A fairly homogenous sample is recommended for IPA research (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). I, therefore, aimed to recruit participants who self-identify as LGBTQ+, aged between 11 and 18 years old and in full-time education. This was purposefully broad, albeit homogenous, with the intention that young people who were questioning, 'fluid' or unsure of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation could be included in the research, to include these underrepresented groups. I felt that the chosen research questions would be relevant and meaningful to participants of various identities within the LGBTQ+ acronym and that this was within the boundaries of sufficient homogeneity, as described by Smith et al. (2009).

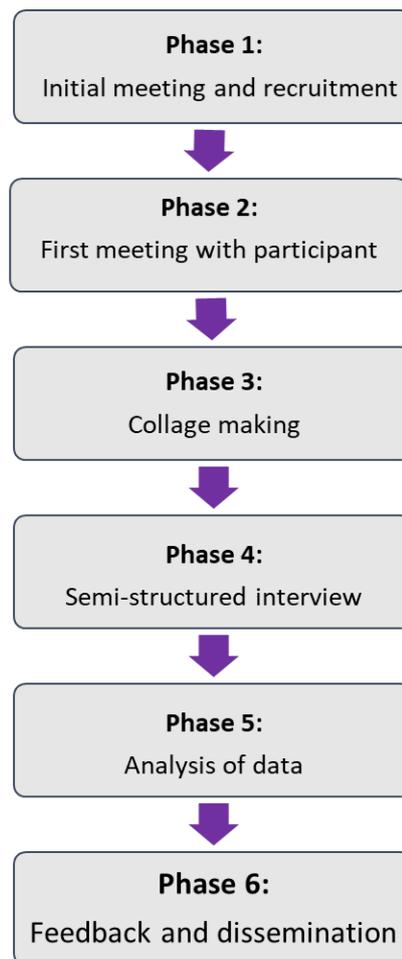
This process of purposive sampling was informed by a range of ethical considerations, with potential participants being existing members of a youth support group organised by a local parent and carers network. This meant they could follow pre-existing lines of support should they need it during the research process, thereby protecting their psychological well-being (Willig, 2013). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, using the following criteria:

- ✓ Identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, queer (and any other groups in the gender and sexual identity spectrum)
- ✓ Aged between 11 and 18
- ✓ In full-time education
- ✓ Accessing support from external professionals such as a youth support group.

In this qualitative research, three participants were recruited. I hoped that keeping the sample size small would support a detailed account of the individual experience by maintaining “a concentrated focus upon a small number of cases” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51).

Using visual methods was a tool through which participants explored their experiences before an interview, and seeking feedback from each participant following the analysis process extended the research. Engagement was required over multiple sessions and I hoped the small number of participants would enhance participant engagement throughout this process.

Figure 2



Outline of the Research Process

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Informed consent describes the process of ensuring participants are fully informed about the research procedure before data collection takes place (Willig, 2013). Participants made an autonomous decision to take part in the research (Flick, 2018). Separate information sheets were designed for parents and adolescents, which were shared prior to the initial meeting when there was an opportunity to explore the nature of the research in greater detail, ask questions and discuss concerns. Fully informed consent was gained by adolescents and parents by providing them with consent forms to sign, which indicated their willingness to take part in the research.

All participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research without fear of being penalised (Willig, 2013). Participants were asked at the beginning and end of each session if they were comfortable taking part in the

research and reminded that they had a right to withdraw their consent, acknowledging that consent is a process rather than a singular event (Rosenblatt, 1995). Throughout each session, I was attuned to the non-verbal communication of each participant, looking for signs they may feel uncomfortable and understanding that perceived power imbalances may be a barrier to expressing dissent (BPS, 2021; Kirk, 2007). At times when I perceived that a subject was more difficult or sensitive for a participant, I responded by checking if they felt comfortable, would like a break or preferred to talk about something else.

Confidentiality was ensured by not using real names and supporting each participant in choosing a pseudonym which would protect their true identity. These pseudonyms were then used throughout the process of data analysis. Details which may make the participants identifiable, such as the name of a school or college, local authority or support group are not included in this research. By doing so, participants were protected from the possibility of future harm.

Age

As discussed, research highlights the importance of exploring the individual lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth (Wilson & Cariola, 2020). I felt it was important to recruit participants who were living through the events I would be asking them to reflect upon, rather than asking adults to look back upon their adolescence (Drummond et al., 2009). I wished to explore the recent experiences of LGBTQ+ young people who were still within the education system, which I felt would be of most value to educational professionals.

As previously noted, societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities is increasing (Curtice et al., 2019), and the internet's role in supporting marginalised CYP requires further exploration (Wilson & Cariola, 2020). To understand how these ongoing societal changes may be influencing the lives of LGBTQ+ CYP, I felt it was important to explore the experiences of those who were currently living through those changes. By doing so, I hoped the research would have greater relevance and impact.

I acknowledged the existence of an ideology which suggests that children are less able to offer credible information than adults and questions the validity of data collected from CYP (Drummond et al., 2009). Therefore, methodological

choices, such as visual techniques, were made to support adolescents in actively engaging in the research process (Darbyshire et al., 2005). Cognitive development during adolescence means that they can share their experiences more effectively within conversational contexts (McAdams & McLean, 2013). I, therefore, considered adolescents to be competent research participants since they were actively involved and talking about their own lives and experiences (Thomas, 2009).

Recruitment Process

The BPS states that to work with CYP under 16, consent must first be gained from their parents or carers (BPS, 2021). The recruitment process began with a meeting between myself and the gatekeeper of a youth support group within a charitable organisation working within a local authority. I asked if they would be able to share the information about the research with parents of young people who access this group. A poster outlining the nature of the study and information sheets were provided for parents/carers and young people who may be interested in taking part in the research. These information sheets asked parents/carers to express an interest in their adolescent participating in the study. When parents/carers made contact, an initial conversation with myself, the parent/carer and the young person was arranged. Within this meeting, the nature of the research was discussed in greater detail and informed consent from the young person and parent/carer was sought.

Method of Data Collection

IPA-based inquiry requires a systematic and attentive process of reflection about everyday lived experience. It seeks to explore the subjective experiences of particular significance to a person and is concerned with “where the ordinary, everyday experience becomes ‘an experience’ of importance” as they reflect and seek to make sense of it (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37). Smith et al. perceive the concept of ‘experience’ itself as inaccessible to the researcher and suggests that IPA inquiry allows the researcher to get as close as possible to the lived experience. The authors outline the steps required to undertake a “practical but coherent approach to the collection and analysis of third-person data” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 33). This guide was used as the primary tool through which I sought to undertake IPA with LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents.

Since I wished to analyse how participants perceive and make sense of things which are happening to them, flexible data collection tools were considered (Smith, 2015). A dialogue with the participant was sought, which could respond to the responses given and allow for areas of interest to be explored as they arose. Semi-structured interviews were, therefore, used as a flexible data collection tool which would not seek to control the subjects of discussion and be led by the participants themselves (Smith, 2015).

Although some basic questions to pursue were considered in advance, I endeavoured to “enter the psychological and social world” of the participants in what I hoped would feel like an informal conversation (Smith, 2015, p. 31). As such, the participants were considered the expert and encouraged to talk about their experiences freely, rather than imposing a restrictive agenda upon the dialogue.

Willig (2013) outlines the need for the IPA researcher to take the role of a person-centred counsellor, as they listen to the account of the person’s experience with empathy and unconditional positive regard without questioning the external validity of what is being shared. Willig describes IPA as a process whereby the researcher does not consider experience ‘at face value’, as with other phenomenological approaches. By stepping outside the account and reflecting upon its status as an account and its wider meanings, the initial ‘description’ is positioned within a wider social, cultural and theoretical context (Larkin et al., 2006).

This can be thought of as a ‘second order’ account, which offers a critical and conceptual commentary on the person’s “sense-making” activities (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 104) since it allows the researcher to capture and portray the essence and structure of a shared lived experience and shed light on the phenomenon by relating it to its wider context. This was very much the intention of this research since I hoped to explore and understand the “quality and texture of experience, as well as its meaning within a particular social and cultural context” (Willig, 2013, p. 17). By capturing and comprehending this, I hoped future support for LGBTQ+ young people would be enhanced.

Use of Visual Methods

Additional research techniques were considered, hoping this would enable and support rich data to be shared (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, since the study was

constrained by a requirement to conduct all interviews remotely due to COVID-19, I sought ways of entering into the psychological and social world of the participants. By doing so, I hoped this would enhance the process of rapport building and reduce the sense of distance between us.

Smith et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of gathering detailed accounts and dialogue rather than the number of participants in doctoral research. Visual methods were used to support participants as they explored and shared their experiences, which would act as a catalyst for discussion within the following semi-structured interviews (Bartoli, 2020). Visual methods were therefore chosen as a way of eliciting verbal data, which would then be analysed using IPA (Reavey, 2012). By using visual methods, I hoped participants would be supported to share a wider range of experiences than within interviews alone, and felt this approach would appeal to adolescents who are likely to be immersed in the visual world of social media.

Accepting that adolescents were likely to have a different style of communication from myself (Lowe, 2020), I used visual methods to support participants to feel comfortable and communicate freely in their own way (Grover, 2004). This is recognised as a research method of growing popularity (Willig, 2013), which may reflect the prevalence of visual imagery within modern culture. By asking participants to make visual representations of their lived experiences through this creative and practical process, I aimed to connect with their imagination (Anning & Ring, 2004). Furthermore, I anticipated that the use of a child-centred research method would support the participants in articulating their views, opinions and stories with clarity (Barker & Weller, 2003). I felt this would make the research accessible to those who may find it difficult to express themselves solely through language (Reavey & Johnson, 2017; Willig, 2013).

According to Willig, “visual methods can alter the voice of the research and allow researchers and audiences to broaden their experience, comprehension and representation of the topic being researched” (2013, p. 157). In addition, it is suggested that visual methods act as a tool through which the participant can give meaning to their experience through the process of describing and analysing them (Veale, 2005). Researchers suggest that visual methods allow for “different insights into social phenomena” (Bolton et al., 2001, p. 503). I, therefore, felt that enhanced understanding and insight would be made possible

through this approach by strengthening the quality of the subsequent semi-structured interviews and the rich linguistic data resulting from them.

With the understanding that I sought to carry out research “through the arts” (Bradley & Harvey, 2019, p. 93), I selected collage as a tool through which participants would be asked to make sense of and communicate their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Collage is a form of art which is derived from the French verb ‘coller’, meaning ‘to stick’, and describes the act of cutting and sticking parts of found images and materials onto a flat surface (Butler-Kisber, 2018). This is a reflective and creative process which supports the processes of thinking, writing and/or discussion (Butler-Kisber, 2018). I, therefore, hoped to support participants in creating powerful representations of previously “unarticulated hopes, confusions and fears” (Leitch, 2009, p. 44), which could then be explored further through semi-structured interviews.

Collage, which draws upon existing and readily available imagery and materials, avoids any concerns a participant may have about their artistic ability (Prasad, 2018). This also avoids any ethical concerns relating to maintaining anonymity which could arise from using personal photographs, with widely available images used, which are usually taken from magazines (Butler-Kisber, 2018). This research method was selected by Prasad (2018), who used collage to complement linguistic data, through the use of artefact-based interviews. In her arts-based research on the lived experiences of transgender adolescents, Lowe (2020) used collage as an ‘elicitation process’ in supporting participants to make sense of their thoughts and experiences which were used as a way of facilitating subsequent conversations. These studies chose to position the participant as ‘creative expert’ and the researcher as ‘attentive audience’ (Butler-Kisber, 2018). This was my intention within the current research.

Overview of Sessions

Participants were supported to explore and share their lived experience over a number of sessions. This began when seeking informed consent when I met with the potential participant alongside their parent, and they were able to ask questions and get to know me a little. In preparation for the research process, participants were invited to reflect upon what they felt had been significant and meaningful experiences in relation to their LGBTQ+ identity, and encouraged to consider the support which had been important to them.

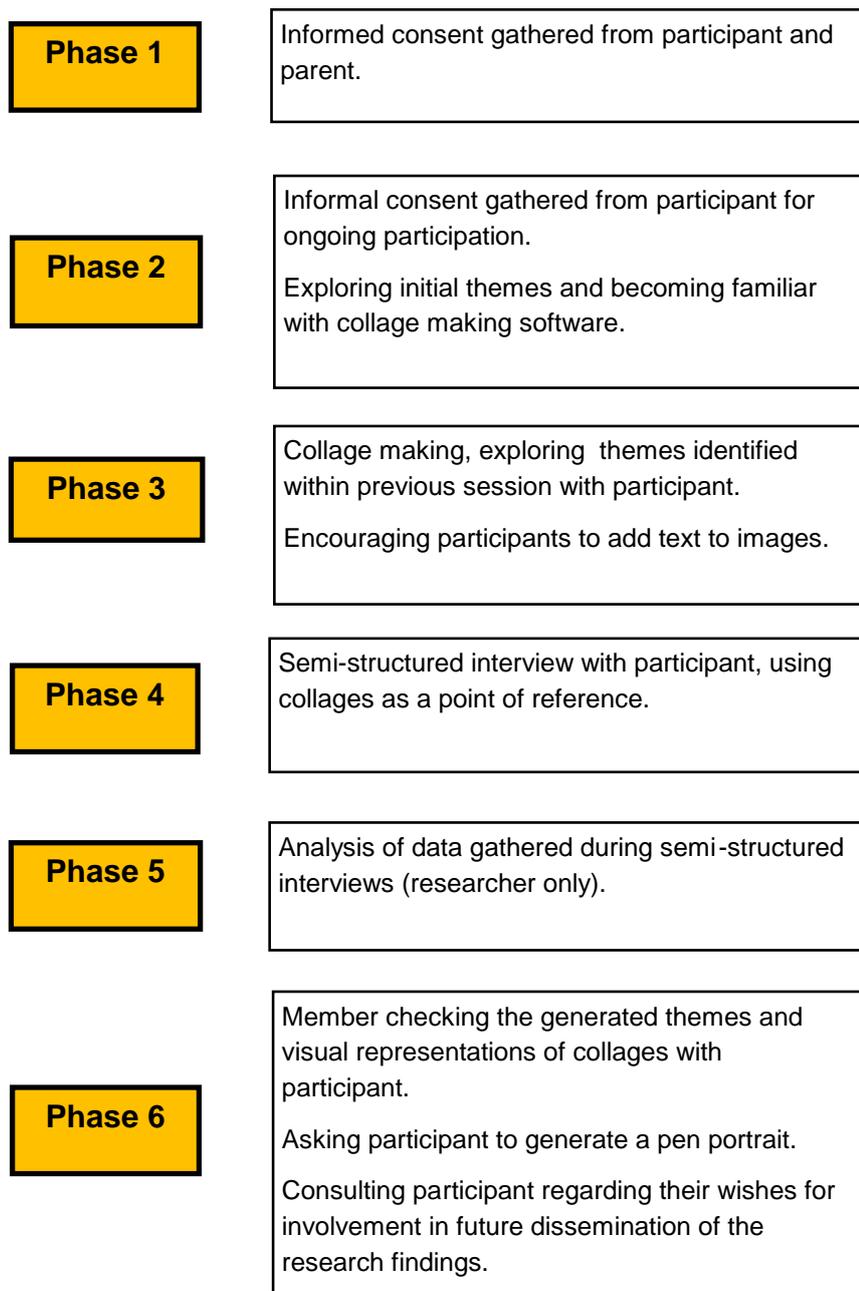
When consent had been gained, I met with the participant individually when they had further opportunity to ask questions about the research and consider the themes and experiences they may wish to explore.

The sessions varied in length, from half an hour to an hour and took place at a time which suited each participant. Before each session, I contacted either the participant or their parent via email to remind them of our planned meeting. Participants were asked to confirm their informal consent for their ongoing participation at the start of each session.

I was fortunate in that no participants dropped out of the research, and I was able to recruit three participants with the initial selection criteria within a similar time frame. No potential participants contacted me and then declined to give their informed consent. Although it took longer than I had hoped to recruit the participants, I felt this was because initial conversations about participating in the project were necessary before contacting me directly. Perhaps as a result of this, the recruited participants demonstrated an unwavering commitment to engage with the research. I had considered the possibility of expanding my selection criteria to include participants aged 18 and over as a way of simplifying the recruitment process, although I chose not to do this when I had successfully recruited three committed participants.

Since all sessions took place remotely, it felt most appropriate that I should meet with each participant individually rather than seeking to organise joint sessions involving all participants simultaneously. This was partly a logistical decision since participants needed to create their collages using an online platform. As a result, I was able to interact with and support each participant throughout their creative collage-making process. Throughout the research, I reflected on my role in the process and considered the participants' experience.

Figure 3



Phases of Research Indicating Activity at Each Stage

Collage Making

Before the collage-making sessions, I met with each participant to explore Google Jamboard, which was the online program they would be using, with the aim of supporting them to feel familiar with using the various tools it contained. As we were both able to see the collage updating in real-time, I initially demonstrated how they might add images by typing a keyword into the search

bar and then selecting an image they could add to a Jamboard page. As the participant became familiar with adding images to the collage, I asked them to consider the themes or experiences they may want to explore. This became a planning tool which I hoped would support them during the subsequent collage-making session.

This exploratory planning page was then referred back to within the collage-making session when I asked the participant which area they may wish to explore in more depth. Participants were not limited to these initial thoughts; they were encouraged to add new ideas and see where the creative process took them. I encouraged participants to be in control of their collage, unless they asked for my support in finding an appropriate image or combining images with text.

Participants often opened up about their experiences as they related to their collage-making choices, and a warm and friendly dialogue developed between us. I hoped that this informal and conversational approach would increase rapport, reduce any perception of distance between us as researcher and participant and help to overcome any sense of physical disconnection. The collage became a mutual point of reference which supported the development of a shared language and enhanced the sense of rapport (Banister & Booth, 2005). No audio recording was made during the collage-making session; field notes were made instead in the hope that participants would feel more comfortable exploring themes in depth.

The reflective process was further supported by encouraging the participants to create a title and add text to their collage. It was hoped that by doing so, additional layers of meaning and insights might be reached (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Field notes were kept as a way of guiding conversations and supporting participants to recall their thoughts or ideas during the subsequent semi-structured interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the collage-making session, an audio-recorded semi-structured interview took place with each participant. Field notes made within each collage-making session were used to plan the questions I might ask participants during their interview. This enabled the informal and conversational approach, which had developed within earlier sessions to continue and encouraged

participants to feel safe to explore their experiences and thoughts freely, without constraint or limitation caused by asking less personal questions.

Collages were used as a shared point of reference, guiding and informing the conversations that took place. This supported participants to access their reflections from collage-making sessions, which I feel resulted in increased levels of comfort and confidence among participants and enhanced the quality of the data.

Open questions were used to encourage participants to describe and explore themes and events they had represented within their collages, supported by follow-up questions and prompts which enabled them to explore a subject in greater depth. Prompt questions were prepared to cover key areas, such as the support they had experienced at home, school and online. This flexible data collection method supported participants to talk about their own lived experience rather than imposing my voice by directing the topic of conversation.

I endeavoured to create a 'safe space' for the participant to share their experiences, by seeking to build positive and trusting relationships which empowered them to describe their ideas openly. By being emotionally attentive and developing a reciprocal exchange, I hoped participants would feel listened to and understood (Riessman, 2008). The use of open questions, reflecting thoughts back and summarising what had been shared helped to create a sense of warmth, empathy and genuineness (Rogers, 1951). Atkinson (1998) describes how these techniques contribute to increased feelings of trust and safety which can then lead to deeper thought and reflection.

This approach meant note-taking was not feasible during the interviews themselves, as I wanted participants to feel they were having a relaxed conversation. Given the remote nature of the interview, I felt it was important to do what I could to demonstrate I was emotionally present. This meant my reflections were not recorded at the time but remembered when I listened to the interview. Doing so may have influenced my reflections, although I felt this was preferable to having an uncomfortable participant.

A debriefing conversation took place at the end of each interview when the participant was asked to consider and share their experience of the research

process. Field notes were kept as a way of informing my consideration of the successes and possible limitations of this approach.

Reflective Box:

The chosen data collection methods were carefully considered and refined through discussion with my research supervisor. While I was committed to including a visual approach to data collection, I did not wish to compromise the integrity of the chosen method of analysis. I, therefore, decided to use visual methods to enhance the interview process rather than interpreting the visual data in its own right.

The collage-making activity was a creative and reflective process which I was able to interact and engage with, although it was important to remove my assumptions or any preconceptions about the experiences being portrayed. I focused on encouraging the participants to fully explore each theme or offering practical support rather than indicating one theme or experience had greater value or significance than another.

Although an interview schedule was developed, the content and direction of the interviews were predominantly informed and shaped by the collages made by each participant. This removed any assumptions I may have made about the experiences of the participants and became an important way of elevating the voice of the participants so that they felt they were *doing* research rather than having it done *to* them.

Analysis

IPA is focused on the detailed examination of lived experience and seeks to enable that experience to be expressed in its own terms rather than imposing predefined category systems (Smith et al., 2009). Accepting that IPA is an interpretive process, I sought to explore the personal perspectives of each participant through a detailed analytic process before reflecting upon their wider significance. I, therefore, aimed to move “from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretive” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). This process is considered an iterative and inductive cycle by Smith (2007), designed to support a reflective engagement with the participant’s account.

I accepted that the analysis would be a joint product of myself as researcher and the participants' accounts and that my findings would be formed from an account of how I considered the participants were feeling (Smith et al., 2009). This double hermeneutic meant the analytic process was subjective, and any 'truth claims' I made would be tentative. Conscious of this, I aimed to develop an interpretation which was dialogical in nature and applied rigorously and systematically.

An immersive and fluid engagement with each transcript was necessary. Rather than viewing IPA as a rigid analytic framework, I considered analysis to be a dynamic, multi-directional and flexible process, open to the possibility of change (Smith et al., 2009). Revision of themes was, therefore, frequent at each stage of the process, as I sought to develop an outcome which was insightful and rigorous. In doing so, it was necessary to move between the part and the whole of the hermeneutic circle by considering the context of the whole transcript when interpreting the meaning of a small section of text and vice versa.

After individual transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were completed, the following process was followed for each participant, as outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

Table 2

Stage	Description of the Process	Actions Taken in Current Research
Step 1	Reading and re-reading: immersion in the transcript.	Re-listening to the recording, re-reading the transcript, noting recollections and observations, noting any shift from general to specific, the build of rapport, possible paradoxes and contradictions.
Step 2	Initial noting of exploratory comments. Engaging with analytic dialogue with each line of transcript.	Examining the transcript with a focus on the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linguistic comments: focusing on the use of language • Descriptive comments: describing the content of what was said

	Close analysis: examining the meaning of what was said, relationships, processes, places, events, values and principles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conceptual questions: reflecting upon possible deeper conceptual meaning of comments.
Step 3	<p>Developing emergent themes. Seeking to capture and reflect an understanding.</p> <p>Reducing volume of detail whilst maintaining complexity.</p>	<p>Examining chunks of the transcript to identify emergent themes. Writing short and succinct statements and phrases.</p> <p>Mapping connections and patterns between initial notes.</p>
Step 4	<p>Searching for connections across emergent themes, creating super-ordinate themes.</p>	<p>Drawing together emergent themes into clusters, creating names for super-ordinate themes, renaming the clusters (abstraction), granting super-ordinate status to an emergent theme (subsuming), noting the number of times a theme is supported (numeration).</p> <p>Compiling transcript extracts for each theme, noting page and line number.</p>

Overview of the Analysis Process

(Column one adapted from Smith et al., 2009. Column two describes actions taken in the current research).

When this process had been completed, it was repeated until the process had been completed for all participants (described as Step 5 by Smith et al.).

Following this, patterns across different cases were explored as a way of examining the potency of each theme and identifying connections between themes (Step 6 in Smith et al.). The super-ordinate themes from each case were compared and integrated into a principal set of super-ordinate themes and sub-themes, conveying the concepts shared by each participant (Smith et al.,

2009). This included some reclassification and regrouping, as some idiosyncratic themes were felt to represent instances of higher order concepts which were shared by the participants.

A principal table of themes was created, showing connections for the group as a whole, “how sub-themes are nested within larger super-ordinate themes and illustrating the theme for each participant” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 101) with quotations from each interview. Following the analysis process, ‘member checking’ was undertaken, whereby participants were invited to respond to and comment on the interpretation of the data. It was hoped that doing so would increase the accuracy, credibility and validity of the research findings (Frey, 2018).

Reflective Box:

The literature review identified an absence of research exploring the positive experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents and a history of research focused on gender identity and sexual identity but not all groups within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Exploring existing research challenged and reduced the preconceptions I held about this subject and highlighted any assumed understanding I had developed about the topic as a member of the LGBTQ+ community myself.

Separating my own lived experience from those being described by participants was important, which I achieved through the use of my research journal and by maintaining a focus on the transcripts rather than returning to the literature. Repeatedly listening to the recordings and re-reading the transcripts supported this process. In doing so, I ensured that my interpretations were grounded within the data. I transcribed and then considered the emergent themes for each interview, leaving time between each one, which supported me to immerse myself with each case before making links between participants and beginning to generate wider themes across the group.

I found the analysis process all-encompassing, and it took much longer than I anticipated. I enjoyed being able to immerse myself in the lived experience of each participant and reflect upon the significance of each small word, comment or pause, as well as the ongoing themes and connections within each transcript. Developing wider themes across cases was more challenging and took longer than I anticipated. In wishing to capture the essence of what was shared, I found it challenging to generate super-ordinate themes which captured my interpretation. My confidence improved as I altered my focus from the whole to the part, and vice versa, as a way of checking the strength and validity of my representation. This led to several amendments and refinements until I felt confident in my analysis.

Quality in Qualitative Research

Rather than seeking to find a singular 'truth', Willig (2013) discusses how phenomenological approaches aim to capture the experiential world of the participant. Instead of seeking to discover a singular truth which can be replicated within future studies, Riessman (2008) emphasises the importance of trustworthiness within qualitative research. In response to this, I sought to produce theoretically meaningful data through a coherent process while transparently communicating my positioning as researcher.

Phenomenological research suggests that the same event can be experienced in different ways, accepting that there are as many different 'worlds' or truths as there are individuals (Willig, 2013). I, therefore, endeavoured to explore the participants' feelings, thoughts and perceptions to explore their world. This was achieved by adopting an attitude of unconditional, positive regard within the interview process, listening empathetically and choosing not to question the validity of what was said (Willig, 2013).

An interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted by "stepping outside of the account and reflecting on its status as an account and its wider meanings" (Willig, 2013, p. 17). I have demonstrated a comprehensive process of analysis by scrutinising each transcript using the same guiding framework, as detailed by Smith et al. (2009). Instead of accepting each account at face value, I sought to understand their position within a wider social, cultural and psychological context (Larkin et al., 2006). This was achieved by offering a critical and conceptual commentary in an attempt to understand the participants 'sense-making' activities (Willig, 2013). This commentary and my personal reflections are highlighted within extracts taken from each transcribed interview.

I endeavoured to consider the wider context of the research findings within the discussion chapter with reference to existing research and literature in this area. In doing so, I accepted that my descriptions would contain a certain amount of interpretation characteristic of interpretive phenomenological research (Willig, 2013). My positioning has been transparent within the methodology, and I have justified the chosen methodology by considering relevant theories and literature and considering my perspective.

In seeking to ensure the validity of the presented research, I ensured adherence to the key characteristics of qualitative research, as outlined by Yardley (2008):

Sensitivity to Context

A primary motivation of any qualitative researcher is to explore new topics, discover new phenomena and “allow patterns to emerge which have not been specified in advance” (Smith, 2015, p. 265). In doing so, the characteristic of sensitivity to context was ensured as I engaged with participants to create new understandings (Smith, 2015). In addition, in-depth knowledge of existing literature in the field of gender diversity and sexual orientation was developed at an early stage, which supported a sensitive approach within the research process as a whole.

Commitment and Rigour

Rigour and commitment refer to the thoroughness of a study, including the appropriateness of the sample to the research aims, the quality of interview and completeness of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Understanding that “a key strength of qualitative research is its specificity and corresponding depth of focus” (Banister et al., 2011, p. 214), I endeavoured to collect rich data supported by creative and visual methods. This required additional commitment and time from the participants. By providing a transparent description of the context, participant and researcher, I have attempted to ensure specificity. I have demonstrated rigour by outlining the stages of the methodological and analytic process. The findings section includes extensive quotations from transcripts to ensure the analysis process and subsequent interpretations were grounded in direct quotes.

Rigour was achieved by ensuring the research was of sufficient depth to offer meaningful insight into the topic. Participants had a diversity of experience, which allowed various perspectives to be explored. Within the research process, I considered whether it would have been beneficial to seek participants from additional subgroups within the wider LGBTQ+ community. However, since an aim of the research was to explore the experiences of fluid, non-binary, unsure and questioning adolescents, this felt potentially problematic. Recruitment was not considered a tick-box exercise, and through analysis and discussion, I felt reassured that diverse experiences had been represented within this homogenous group.

A solid grounding of the IPA research process was gained through immersion in its theoretical background and method, as outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

Unique insights were achieved by generating rich data within the semi-structured interview process, which was enhanced by the creative collage-making process. A rigorous data analysis process was followed, enhanced by my “empathic understanding of the participants’ perspectives” (Smith, 2015, p. 266).

Data analysis resulted in the identification of four super-ordinate themes, with twenty-three sub-themes shared between them. Universality of experience was a key consideration when identifying super-ordinate themes. The majority of sub-themes were shared by all participants, although a small number were more significant for some individuals than others.

Transparency and Coherence

Research coherence has been achieved by ensuring the theoretical approach, research questions, methodology and interpretation of data are aligned and complementary (Smith, 2015). Similarities between the participants’ experiences have been identified, accompanied by a detailed and transparent account of the interpretive process. Discussion of the study findings has been sensitive to the interpretive nature of the presented research, understanding that “qualitative research typically offers the researcher’s interpretation of people’s accounts of their experiences” (Smith, 2015, p. 267). An awareness of the double hermeneutic I have been engaged in has been central to achieving this sensitivity, as I attempted to “make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3).

I sought to create a study which did not impose my understanding or assume meaning based on my own experience but endeavoured to understand the participants’ lived experience. I have been transparent about my connection to the subject of study, have reflected on the potential for bias and clearly stated my positioning. My research journal has been a valuable tool through which I have considered any pre-existing beliefs I may have held. My active interpretive role has been identified within the introduction, and extracts from my journal have been included to demonstrate this cyclical process of self-reflexivity and reflectivity and illustrate the influence of my thoughts and feelings (Tracy, 2010).

Reflective Box:

In designing this study, I hoped to include a participatory approach so that participants could be supported to engage in the analysis process. However, I did not feel this would be complementary to the IPA methodology since the interpretive process did not easily lend itself to collaboration. I, therefore, decided that a participatory approach would likely compromise the quality of the research. However, I felt it important to engage in 'member checking' with participants as a way of ensuring participants were not having research done *to* them. I believe this increased the strength of my interpretation and do not feel it interrupted the inductive process, possibly since participants agreed with my interpretations and no amendments or alterations were suggested. I feel it would be important to include this feedback (and interaction with the inductive process) should this have occurred as a way of ensuring transparency.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the design and process of this research, and offered an explanation of participant recruitment. A discussion of the ethical considerations which were necessary within my work with this group of potentially vulnerable young people was offered, and the quality of the research design was considered. The following chapter will focus on the research findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

The previous chapter detailed the method and design of the presented research. This chapter aims to illustrate the key findings following the analytic process as I seek to answer the research questions:

RQ1). How do LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents perceive their noteworthy experiences of themselves in relation to others?

RQ2). How do LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents experience support at school, online and at home?

RQ3). What can educational psychologists learn about supporting LGBTQ+ CYP from the perceived experiences of adolescents in this group?

The participants will be introduced through a pen portrait which will offer some background information about each young person. The identified themes will be presented and explored, supported by textual data extracts and illustrated by participant-generated visual imagery.

Participant Pen Portraits

Three participants aged between 15 and 17, took part in the research. Since the current research is focused and interested in the experiences of adolescents who identify as LGBTQ+ (and anything else within this inclusive acronym), I felt it would be useful to begin this section with a brief description of each participant. They were invited to create a short pen portrait about themselves which could be shared, containing information they felt would be helpful for the reader to know as they sought to connect with their lived experiences.

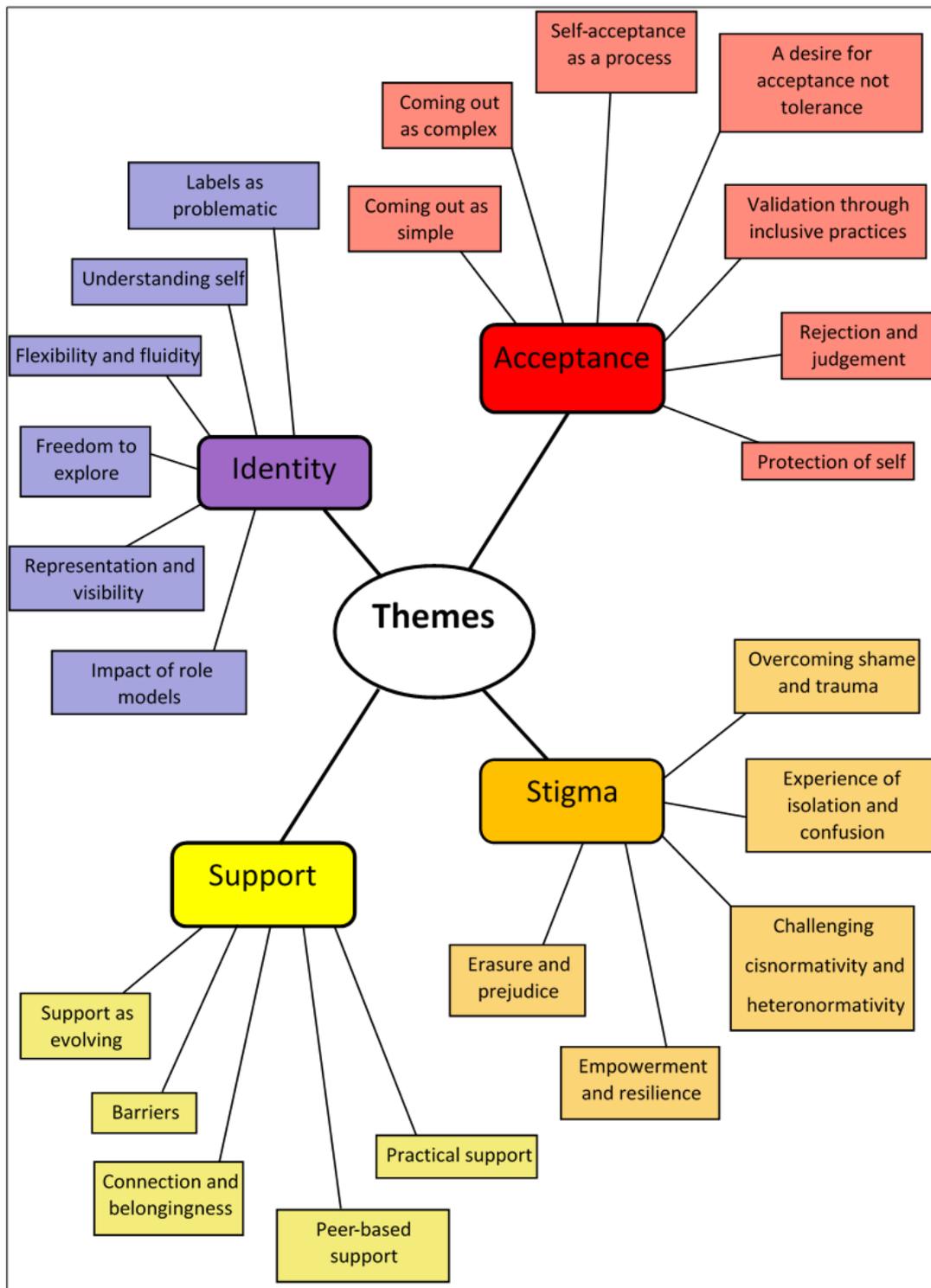
Table 3

<p>'Freddie':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I am 16 years old.• My pronouns are She/They.• I labelled myself as bisexual when I was 10 years old.• I came out to some of my family when I was 15 but had been out to friends since I was 12.
<p>'Lucas':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I'm 17 years old.• My pronouns are he/him.• I grew up in South Yorkshire.• I do a construction course at college.• I came out as bi when I was 12 and trans at 15.• I have hobbies such as skateboarding, gaming and ice hockey.
<p>'Charlotte':</p> <p>I'm Charlotte from South Yorkshire. I'm 15 years-old and in my last year of school. I go by she/her and I am bisexual. I came out to my mum, sister and friends about a year ago and I managed to tell all of them within a few days. It was quite casual because I just messaged my mum, my friends already kind of knew as they helped me on my journey and I just slipped it into conversation with my sister. I've been lucky enough to have an accepting family, it's the rest of the world I've had issues with. School, in particular, have been rubbish with everything, but I did meet all of my friends there and we are all LGBTQ+ which has massively helped me as I knew I would be accepted by everyone around me.</p>

Pen Portraits Created by Participants

The super-ordinate themes and corresponding sub-themes for the group were represented within the following visual representation.

Figure 4



Visual Representation of Super-Ordinate Themes and Sub-Themes

Within the creative process of creating this visual representation, some adjustment and refinement of sub-themes was considered necessary. Viewing

each theme from this wider perspective highlighted any areas of incongruity, and this became a final refining stage of the analysis process.

Themes

Four distinct super-ordinate themes were identified: acceptance, identity, stigma and support, containing twenty-three sub-themes altogether.

The analytic process highlighted the interconnected nature of many identified themes and how many of the sub-themes could arguably be incorporated into other super-ordinate themes. Confidence was strengthened by returning to the original transcript and conducting a micro-analysis of a phrase or sentence as a way of “connecting the part back to the whole” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 105).

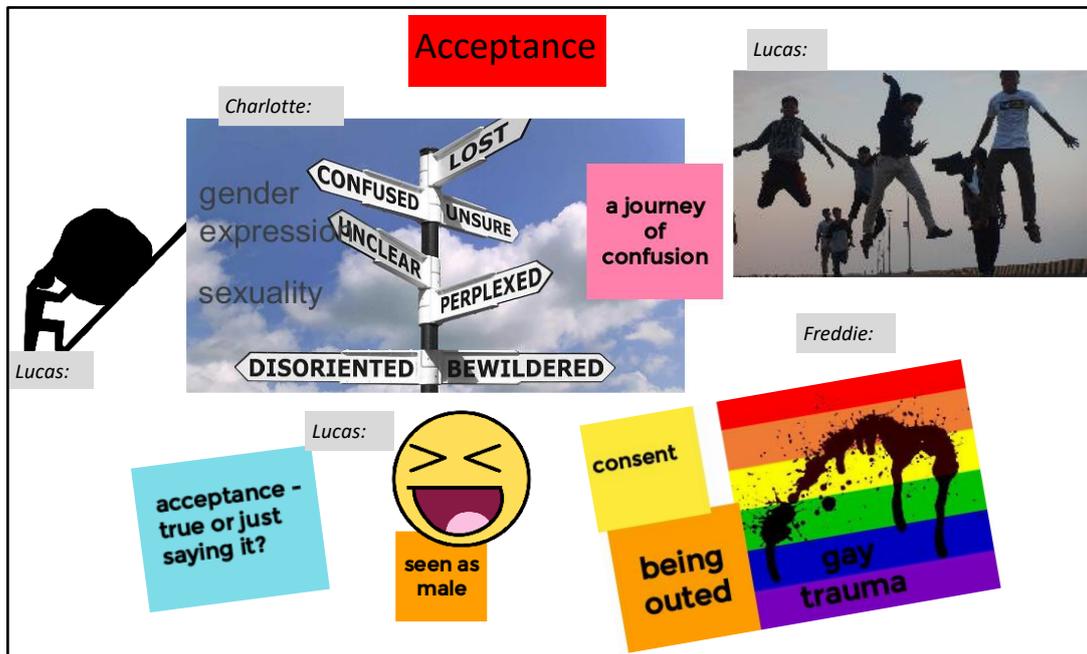
Each super-ordinate theme will now be explored in detail, with a discussion of the sub-themes contained within each. Visual representations of each super-ordinate theme were created, including quotations which were felt to typify each sub-theme.

Sections of collage created by each participant have been selected to represent sub-themes within each super-ordinate theme and have been identified by myself by comparing and matching the use of metaphor, image or text to the interview transcript for each participant. This interpretation was then checked with each participant to ensure adherence to the intended meaning of any visual image they had created.

Collages were not analysed and have not been considered data in their own right; they were created as a way of helping participants to feel comfortable (Lowe, 2020) and speak freely (Grover, 2004) during the subsequent interview process. However, they have been included as a way of offering contextual richness and supporting the reader to engage with the hermeneutic process.

Super-Ordinate Theme: Acceptance

Figure 5



Acceptance Title Page

All participants described their experience of acceptance, the confusing and often painful internal journey towards self-acceptance of their sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as the acceptance they have experienced from others. 'Coming out' was described as complex and multi-dimensional, with contrasts drawn between the joy and simplicity of 'coming out' to peers and the more layered and potentially problematic process of 'coming out' to family members. True and full acceptance from others was considered important in enabling participants to feel accepted, with LGBTQ+ inclusive practices felt to be an important measure of this. Fear of judgement from loved ones and the need to protect oneself from the potential of rejection was described, highlighting a shared sense of vulnerability and risk.

Figure 6



Acceptance Visual Representation

Sub-Theme 1: 'Coming out' as Simple

The impact of implicit and unspoken acceptance was universally described, with this being preferable to the need to 'come out' more formally. 'Coming out' to peers was felt to almost unnecessary, as shared by Lucas: *"I'd never directly said it, they picked up on those subtle hints"*, and Freddie: *"I never came out and I never said it, but they just sort of knew"*. Lucas explained the use of code as a short-hand means of 'coming out' to other LGBTQ+ peers *"Gen-Z...do a bit of a hand flip, and then they both assume they are gay"*, making verbal

confirmation of the fact or use of a label a redundant formality. Feelings of validation and joy caused by this immediate acceptance were described by Freddie: *“It was one of the best experiences...someone that you’re...that really matters to you”*.

‘Coming out’ to family members was often experienced as simple, with acceptance almost immediate. When describing ‘coming out’ as bisexual to her family, Charlotte referred to it as an anti-climactic event, saying *“It were just like, the most casual thing ever”* and *“it would just like go o’er [over] their heads and they wun’t [would not] mind”*. The response of some family members was surprising, as described by Lucas when “coming out’ as trans: *“I didn’t think out of anyone...that my dad was gonna [going to] be that accepting”*.

Sub-Theme 2: ‘Coming out’ as Complex

‘Coming out’ to others was described as complicated by Freddie and Lucas. Both talked about the importance of ‘coming out’ on their own terms by having control of how, when and who they choose to ‘come out’ to:

Freddie: *“my trust got betrayed, I wasn’t ready, I didn’t consent to being outed”*.

Lucas: *“there’s a big difference between ‘coming out’ with my sexuality and ‘coming out’ with my gender”*.

Lucas described a resentment towards the need to ‘come out’ prior to having gender confirmation surgery, indicating an impatience and frustration about the process: *“until I get top surgery, and I can fully pass as male, I have to ‘come out’”, and “you have to keep ‘coming out’ to everyone your entire life”*.

Freddie and Lucas both referred to how misunderstanding expressed by others had negatively impacted them:

Freddie: *“there was this expectation because my mum didn’t care that I should have been happy”*.

Lucas: *“A lot of people think it’s a simple thing of going ‘oh yeah I’m gay’ (laughs). Whereas there’s a lot more pressure and there’s a lot more...like stress that comes with it all”*.

Both indicated that 'coming out' is an inherently stressful experience and describe the reactions of others as often unhelpful and overly simplistic. Supporting others as they develop their own understanding was a further cause of frustration for Lucas: *"the worst part was...having those old people learn over time"*, which he describes as a never ending process: *"I don't think others understand how hard and complicated it can be sometimes. 'Coming out' and having to explain things to people constantly"*.

Sub-Theme 3: Self-Acceptance as a Process

A process of reflection and self-discovery was described by all, as participants had endeavoured to make sense of their newly discovered identity. A sense of shock and bewilderment was shared by all:

Charlotte: *"I had to start anew"*.

Freddie: *"when I was starting to feel these feelings, I cared a lot that it was me"*.

Lucas: *"it was this whole new world except I was learning all these things"*.

The journey towards self-acceptance was described by Charlotte and Lucas as a long and intense process they needed to undertake:

Charlotte: *"I'd think about something, I'd feel like I'd solved it"*.

Lucas: *"I was trying to like push at this big boulder up a hill"*.

Lucas described this as a solitary journey which took a great deal of time and thought: *"It's those late-night thinks, staring at your ceiling"*. For Charlotte, overcoming negative preconceptions she previously held was necessary in order for her to accept herself: *"I've taken a more positive light to it"*, indicating that this may be an ongoing process for her.

Sub-Theme 4: A Desire for Acceptance not Tolerance

Lucas and Charlotte both talked about the significance of how others accept their gender expression and identity:

Lucas: *"they just see me as an actual guy, that gives a lot of euphoria"*.

Charlotte: *“he had no problem with the fact that it were from the...lads’ section”*.

Charlotte describes her experience of clothes shopping with her family, as a self-identified genderqueer person. She explains the sense of freedom to choose clothes from the menswear sections of the shops she visits. To her, this freedom represents acceptance.

Lucas’ use of the word *euphoria* may be a conscious reference to overcoming feelings of gender dysphoria, as he describes the positive emotions he experienced when feeling connected with his true gender identity. Gender dysphoria can be defined as “the distress arising from conflicts between a person’s gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex” (Beischel et al., 2021, p. 1). Gender euphoria is considered to be the polar opposite of this; it describes the positive experiences of gender, which are characterised by “a joyful feeling of rightness, experienced in relation to their bodies, minds, and social lives” (Beischel et al., 2021, p. 18).

Behaviours and relationships based on tolerance rather than acceptance were universally described:

Freddie: *“I would NEVER want my mum to think of me in any different way than before”*.

Charlotte: *“they just kinda [kind of] do what’s legally required of them”*.

Lucas: *“my brother will deadname me, and my mum will... go ‘NO, it’s your brother”*.

Freddie voices this thought as an ongoing fear, perhaps since she has only recently ‘come out’ to her mother and these feelings are unresolved. For Charlotte, this is an ongoing frustration within her school; she describes a tokenistic LGBTQ+ curriculum which she perceives as marginalising rather than inclusive. Lucas’ experience of being ‘deadnamed’ by his brother is indicative of the tolerance he perceives from him: *“I wouldn’t describe my brother as transphobic, but I wouldn’t describe him as accepting”*, contrasting with his mother’s reaction which arguably evidences her acceptance.

Sub-Theme 5: Validation Through Inclusive Practices

The impact of inclusive practices was described by Charlotte and Lucas in particular:

Charlotte: *“So having it, kinda [kind of] like ...slipped in, like a pronouns thing”.*

Lucas: *“teachers are really, really good with pronouns and names”.*

Charlotte talked about how being asked for her chosen pronouns meant that she immediately felt accepted and how this removes the anxiety she felt about ‘coming out’: *“It’s nice to see the pressure’s been eased on, having to ‘come out”.* This small gesture, which she describes as being included on a form she had been asked to complete changed her whole experience: *“It’s the little things that kinda mek [kind of make] everything an enjoyable experience”.*

Both describe the use of chosen pronouns as a short-hand indicator of inclusivity and acceptance in any given situation. Simply being asked for their given pronouns when meeting someone new or filling in a form has a profound impact for Charlotte; it feels validating and liberating and is an indicator that she is in an LGBTQ+ inclusive environment. For Lucas, the use of his chosen pronouns is more of a fundamental right, although it also acts in a similar way by providing immediate validation.

Sub-Theme 6: Rejection and Judgement

A fear of being rejected was shared by all participants:

Charlotte: *“that initial fear of you’re not going to be accepted”.*

Lucas: *“you get a sense of who’s going to be quite understanding and who’s going to be quite judgemental”.*

Freddie: *“if these people have a bad reaction, then I don’t want them in my life anyway”.*

This fear appears to be focused on the initial disclosure when ‘coming out’ rather than rejection or judgement as an ongoing experience within relationships. A need to assess the likelihood of rejection is also implicit here,

as a kind of risk assessment ahead of the actual event. The reason for being alert to this possibility is made clear by Freddie: *“when it’s your family, if they have a bad reaction that can cost you everything”*, referring perhaps to the loss of both emotional and financial support. Lucas describes rejection as a traumatic event: *“If people don’t accept you...that can cause a lot of stress and emotional damage”*.

Sub-Theme 7: Protection of Self

The need to protect a vulnerable self was described by Lucas and Freddie:

Lucas: *“you just want to kind of curl up and hide yourself”*.

Freddie: *“I’d obviously be cautious around certain people”*.

Both talked about an extended and frightening period of silence they had lived through, between realisation and ‘coming out’:

Freddie: *“I was ten, I was...I didn’t speak about it until I was about fourteen!”*.

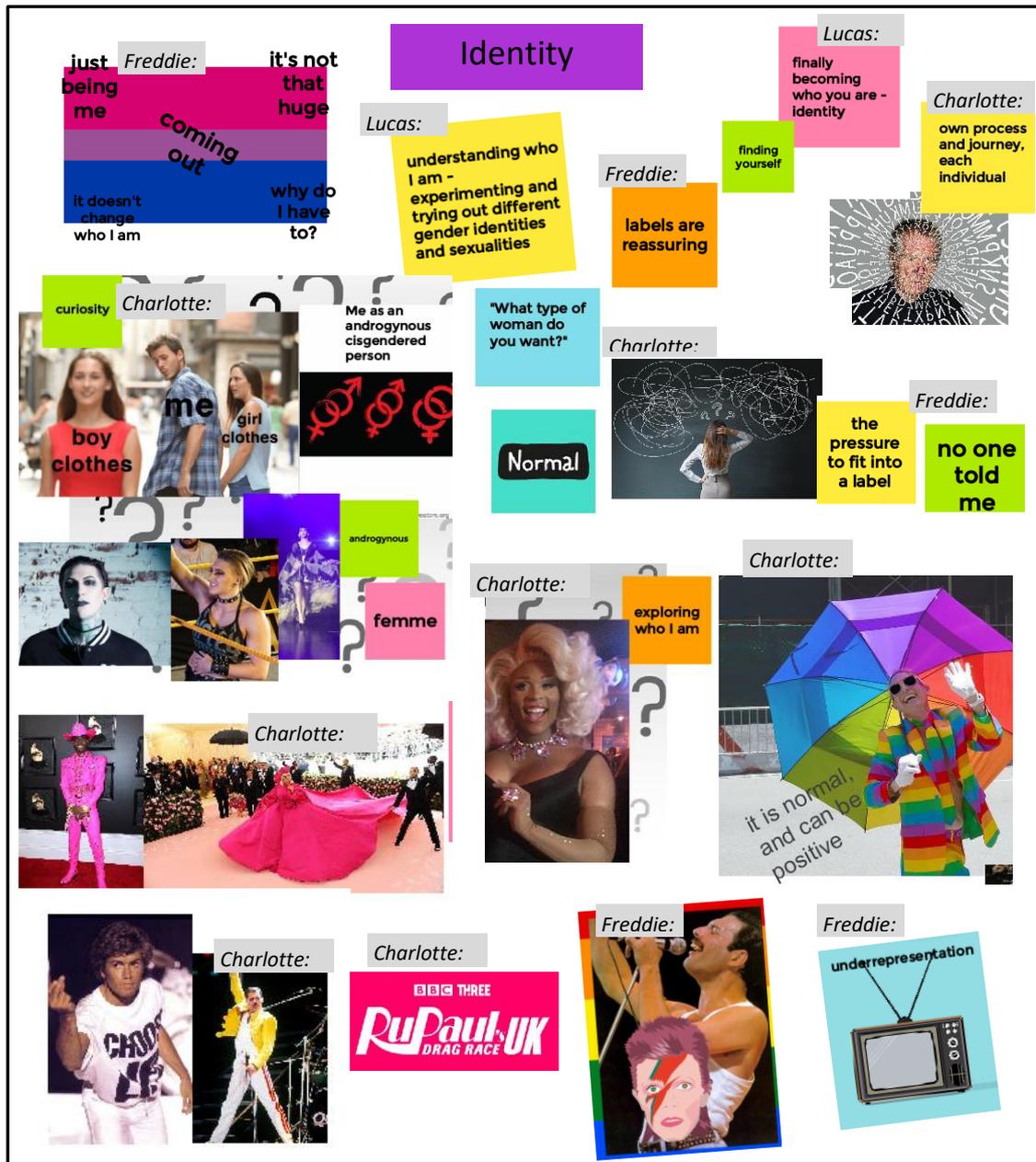
Lucas: *“I was terrified to tell anyone; in case they didn’t want me to be that way”*.

Fear of judgement from others led to this experience, with an implication that they needed to build their inner resilience before ‘coming out’ and facing the prospect of rejection and judgement. Maintaining silence until they felt strong enough to cope with the potential negative consequences was, therefore, necessary; predicting others’ responses based on what they knew about them did not offer enough reassurance. Freddie describes this as a fortifying process to something predictable and perhaps inevitable: *“you’ve just got to brace yourself for the negative reaction”*.

Participants described non-disclosure as a period of self-preservation, as Freddie shares here: *“‘coming out’ could be the worst thing that I could do, because you never know how it’s gonna [going to] turn out”*. Charlotte also refers to the feelings of strength and resilience she has developed when ‘coming out’: *“it’s not my issue that I have to deal with”*.

Super-Ordinate Theme: Identity

Figure 7

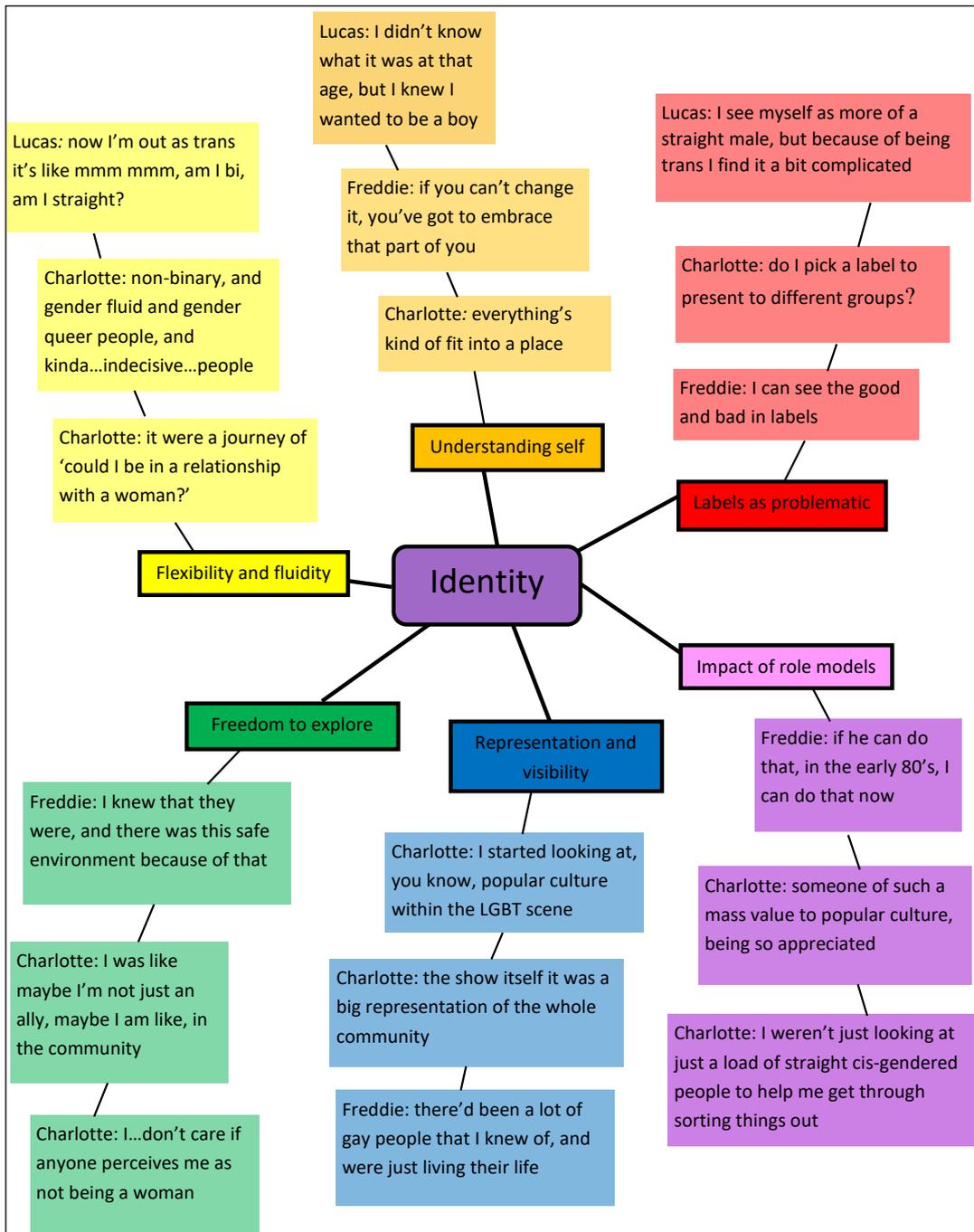


Identity Title Page

Identity was a significant theme for all participants. A complex and ambivalent relationship with sexual and gender-defining labels was shared, with labels sometimes offering the reassurance of shared understanding, at others feeling rigid and binary. A fluid and evolving exploration of their LGBTQ+ identity was described, characterised by a sense of freedom to explore their identity without wishing to permanently or definitively label it. The presence of LGBTQ+ role

models in society was central in helping participants to understand themselves, with the importance of LGBTQ+ representation and visibility being described by everyone.

Figure 8



Identity Visual Representation

Sub-Theme 1: Labels as Problematic

Although all participants chose to label themselves as bisexual in their pen portrait, this did not reflect the complex and ambivalent relationship with labels they described. Simply put by Freddie: *“I can see the good and bad in labels”*. Feelings of frustration were described due to them offering a binary and fixed definition of sexual orientation and gender identity, which often felt constraining and did not match their own experience:

Freddie: *“if someone had told me, you don’t have to pick, I would’ve just known”; “I didn’t see any in between”*.

Lucas: *“I see myself as more of a straight male, but because of being trans I find it a bit complicated”*.

The problematic nature of many labels was illustrated by Lucas in particular, in the process of understanding his identity as a trans person: *“if you’re trans and you’re dating a female and haven’t had any of the surgeries, it’s kind of one of those things of what really is it?”*. For him, labels are an added complication in making sense of his identity.

Labels are perceived as necessary by Charlotte since they serve a purpose: *“it’s kinda [kind of] hard to explain to someone without saying a label”*. For her, communicating her chosen identity is the primary reason to use a label; she does not see a need to define herself in the same way, however: *“I don’t necessarily need a label”*. For her, a flexible application of labels is preferable, with different labels used depending on the audience at the time: *“do I pick a label to present to different groups?”* or saying she doesn’t have a label at all: *“I’m just gonna say I dun’t [do not] have one”*.

Sub-Theme 2: Understanding Self

An evolving understanding of self was described by Lucas and Charlotte, which was referred to as a process of discovery:

Charlotte: *“it were a journey of ‘could I be in a relationship with a woman?’”*.

Lucas: *“I didn’t know what it was at that age, but I knew I wanted to be a boy”*.

This was a long and often multi-layered process, with connections drawn with acceptance, as participants explored their identity over a period of time. Here Lucas describes his initial understanding of himself as bisexual, and later when he began to understand his trans identity:

Lucas: *"I thought...that I was...bi at the time"; "I realised that I didn't want her to see me as female anymore"*.

As a result of this process of self-exploration, Charlotte described reaching a more authentic version of herself: *"everything's kind of fit into a place"*. For Freddie, this journey is ongoing, as she describes being bisexual: *"I don't want that to be my whole identity"*.

Sub-theme 3: Flexibility and Fluidity

For Charlotte and Lucas, their identity was characterised by an ongoing open-mindedness and flexibility, as they continue to explore their identity.

Charlotte: *"I labelled myself as an open mind straight person"*.

Lucas: *"now I'm out as trans it's like mmm mmm, am I bi, am I straight?"*.

Both describe a flexible and evolving understanding of their own identity, characterised by the open-mindedness Charlotte refers to. Resistance to the perceived societal pressure to define themselves in a more fixed and permanent way is evident. For Lucas, this fluidity also refers to the evolving understanding of his identity after 'coming out' as trans, and how he experiences his sexual identity from a new perspective after transitioning. This translates into Lucas choosing to label himself as bisexual, as a short-hand way of communicating this complexity: *"if people ask about my sexuality, I'll be like, "oh yeah I'm bi"*.

Charlotte describes how she is exploring her gender expression through clothes: *"I enjoy dressing in...anything, just any form of clothes"*. She talks about clothes as non-gendered and assertively rejects societal expectations about how to dress because she is a cisgender female: *"clothes are clothes. You wear what you want"*. Rather than choosing a traditionally female or male gender expression through clothes, or even a non-binary or gender fluid identity, Charlotte feels that the term genderqueer describes her gender identity,

perhaps because it represents a further move away from binary, or even non-binary gender understanding of gender. For her, being genderqueer signifies a rejection of the entire gender identity conversation: *“I enjoy dressing in...anything, just any form of clothes”*.

Sub-theme 4: Freedom to Explore

Feeling free to explore their identity without fear or expectation was important for Freddie and Charlotte. Freddie described being with other LGBTQ+ young people enabled her to do this: *“you could feel safe, because, they can’t be homophobic”*. This created a sense of safety for her, which meant that she felt able to explore her identity: *“I knew that they were, and there was this safe environment because of that”*.

Creating a sense of safety by seeking a community in which they feel able to explore and express their identity authentically and freely has been a vital part of the participants’ journey. Similarly, Charlotte describes a sense of freedom she has experienced with her family as she explored her identity: *“I could bring a partner home and they’d be like “well, hi, nice to meet you”*. Supported by this open and non-judgemental environment, she felt able to explore her LGBTQ+ identity: *“I was like maybe I’m not just an ally, maybe I am like, in the community”*. Charlotte connected with the LGBTQ+ community as an ally, and the freedom she experienced supported her to identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. The inclusive nature of the LGBTQ+ umbrella acronym was therefore a key factor in helping Charlotte to understand her identity; identifying somewhere within the acronym was the key factor for her, rather than knowing exactly where she was situated.

Sub-Theme 5: Representation and Visibility

The importance of having positive LGBTQ+ role models was highlighted by both Freddie and Charlotte, with both describing their frustration with negatively portrayed LGBTQ+ characters, news stories which reinforce negative views of LGBTQ+ people, and popular culture dominated by heteronormativity, which to them was a marginalising experience:

Charlotte: *“it was almost always negative”*.

Freddie: *“Straight people are in every single TV show, every single movie”.*

Both talked about their experience of knowing or meeting LGBTQ+ people, describing the way they perceived them to living unapologetically and without shame:

Charlotte: *“he’s very, you know, out and proud about it”.*

Freddie: *“there’d been a lot of gay people that I knew of, and were just living their life”.*

Popular culture was significant for both Freddie and Charlotte in helping them to understand and explore their identity. Both described the way they sought out LGBTQ+ representation and visibility on television and social media:

Charlotte: *“I started looking at, you know, popular culture within the LGBT scene”.*

Freddie: *“things that I was watching also showed more gay things...I was like maybe this isn’t that bad”.*

Present-day and historical LGBTQ+ figures were significant for both Charlotte and Freddie, with musicians such as Freddie Mercury, George Michael, David Bowie, Lil Nas X and Lady Gaga being important LGBTQ+ role models. LGBTQ+ themed TV shows such as Ru Paul’s Drag Race have been significant in allowing Charlotte to connect with diverse people within the LGBTQ+ community: *“Ru Paul’s Drag Race...introduced me to everything else.”; “the show itself it was a big representation of the whole community”.*

Sub-Theme 6: Impact of Role Models

Charlotte and Freddie described the personal impact of LGBTQ+ role models they had come across within popular culture. For Freddie, this appreciation cannot be overstated: *“I love...I love these people, these are the biggest people”.* Learning of successful and celebrated cultural icons who are ‘out’ as bisexual, such as David Bowie and Lady Gaga is a profoundly validating experience for them:

Freddie: *“Oh my god! Oh my god! This is revolutionary, he is bisexual.”*

Charlotte: *“someone of such a mass value to popular culture, being so appreciated”*.

For both, being able to connect with celebrities who have previously shared their bisexual identity in a public way is a powerful and empowering experience, as described by Freddie: *“if he can do that, in the early 80s, I can do that now”*. Watching historical interviews in which David Bowie was asked about his sexual orientation has helped Freddie to accept her own bisexual identity: *“he was so, like, matter of fact”*.

In a similar way, Charlotte perceives the diverse LGBTQ+ representation on Ru Paul’s Drag Race as supportive in helping her to understand her identity: *“it were like a big range of people, erm, which was very helpful”*. For Charlotte, the diverse LGBTQ+ visibility on Drag Race has helped her to connect with LGBTQ+ contemporaries, rather than look up to them as distant icons: *“it was nice to see people that I liked that were in the community”*.

Super-Ordinate Theme: Stigma

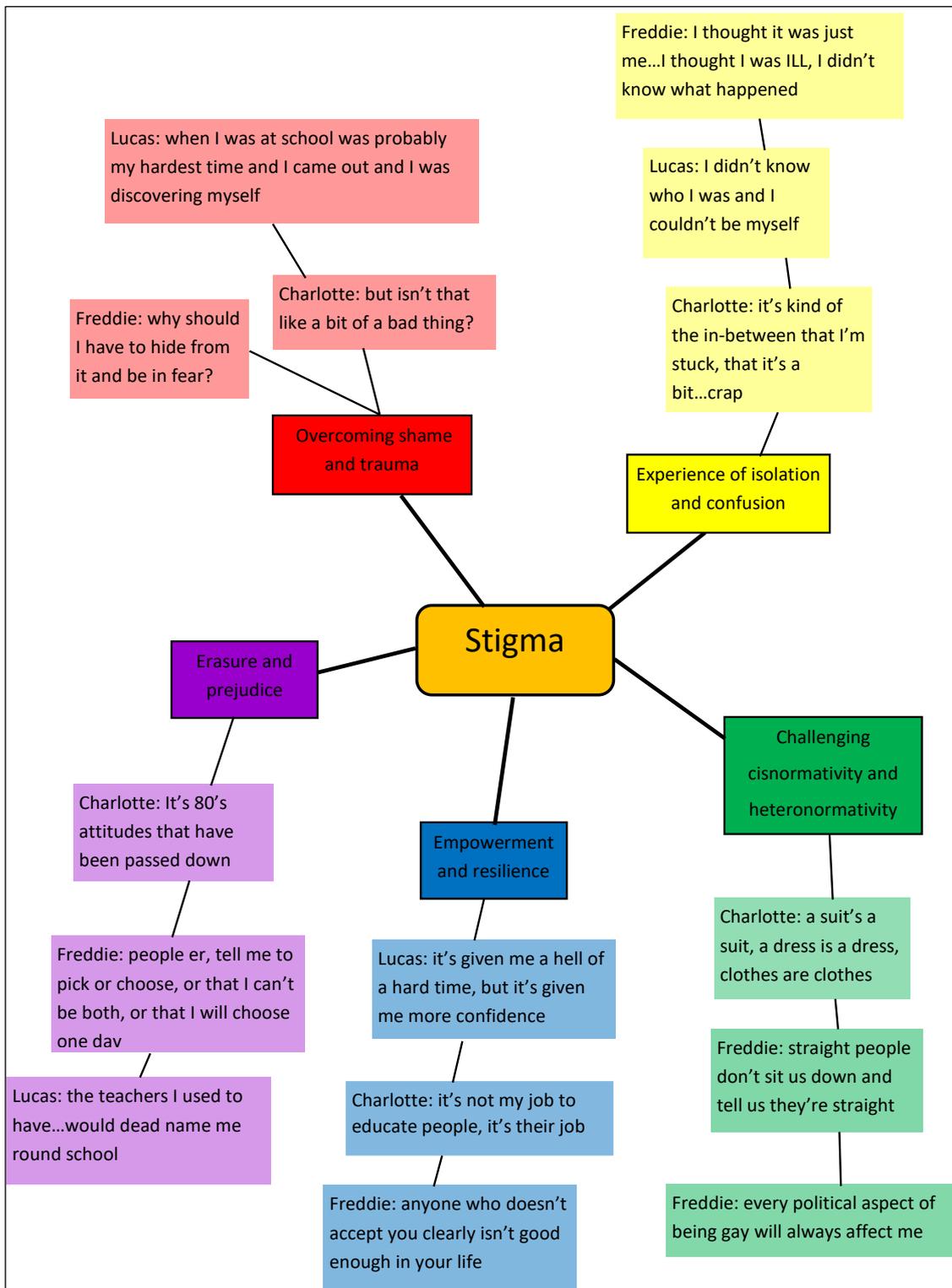
Figure 9



Stigma Title Page

All participants described their experience of stigma, with trauma and feelings of shame universally experienced and powerfully described. A period of confusion was common to all participants, during which they experienced feelings of isolation prior to 'coming out' and accessing support. Experience of prejudice was shared by all, including the damaging impact of microaggressions and feelings of erasure. All participants referred to the resilience and empowerment they felt after overcoming their experience of stigma, with some also questioning what they perceive to be a societal status quo of cisnormativity and heteronormativity.

Figure 10



Stigma Visual Representation

Sub-Theme 1: Overcoming Shame and Trauma

Feelings of shame were described by all participants, during a traumatic period when they were realising their LGBTQ+ identity.

Lucas: *“when I was at school was probably my hardest time and I came out and I was discovering myself”.*

Charlotte: *“but isn’t that like a bit of a bad thing?”.*

Freddie: *“I accept gay people, but...does it have to be me?”*

Freddie and Charlotte shared the way they overcame negative perceptions of what it means to be LGBTQ+, through a conscious choice to embrace it:

Freddie: *“why should I have to hide from it and be in fear?”.*

Charlotte: *“I’ve taken a more positive light to it”.*

For Freddie, continuing to live with shame and secrecy was not an option: *“hiding it felt really bad, so I didn’t want to do that anymore”.* This sub-theme appears to represent a rejection of the shame participants described.

Sub-Theme 2: Experience of Isolation and Confusion

Both Freddie and Lucas referred to their experience of feeling isolated as they attempted to make sense of themselves:

Freddie: *“I thought it was just me...I thought I was ILL; I didn’t know what happened!”.*

Lucas: *“understanding these feelings that I felt, that no-one else seemed to have felt”.*

For Charlotte, feelings of isolation were caused by feeling physically distant from more urban areas which have a more visible LGBTQ+ community: *“it’s kind of the in-between that I’m stuck, that it’s a bit...crap”.*

Freddie and Lucas referred to a time when they felt confused before they began to make sense of themselves and accept their LGBTQ+ identity:

Lucas: *"I didn't know who I was and I couldn't be myself"*.

Freddie: *"my whole view on who I was, changed, as soon as I realised that I didn't have to be alone in it and I didn't have to keep it a secret"*.

Sub-Theme 3: Challenging Cisnormativity and Heteronormativity

Charlotte and Freddie referred to how they question the societal norms of cisnormativity and heteronormativity. For Charlotte, this affects how she shops for clothes *"I'm going to the men's section, they have better shirts"* and what she chooses to wear: *"a suit's a suit, a dress is a dress, clothes are clothes"*. For her, this is logical and factual, yet it represents an assertive rejection of gender-based norms.

Freddie questions the need for LGBTQ+ people to 'come out', saying *"straight people don't sit us down and tell us they're straight"* and *"they're not even like dominant over us anymore"*, challenging the need to seek acceptance from mainstream society. By doing so, she points out the implicit power imbalance within 'coming out' conversations and rejects the idea of seeking approval. For Freddie, this represents an absolute refusal to be marginalised: *"people are hopefully more educated now and if they're not, what they gonna do?"*, referring to a perception of increasingly liberal views within society. This is an emboldened and assertive perspective which considers those who hold prejudiced views to be the problem holder, rather than positioning herself a member of a marginalised group.

Sub-Theme 4: Empowerment and Resilience

Feelings of empowerment and inner strength were shared by all, as participants described how they had moved towards a place of self-acceptance:

Lucas: *"I am less scared of people...I can be myself and be very confident"*.

Freddie: *"definitely a lot of strength was needed"*.

Charlotte: *"I...don't care if anyone perceives me as not being a woman"*.

Living with authenticity and without shame has helped to reinforce these feelings of empowerment and develop a sense of fulfilment, as described by Lucas: *“I’ve made the person I wanna [want to] be, not the person everyone else wants me to be”*.

For Freddie and Charlotte, acceptance as an LGBTQ+ person should be unspoken and implicit:

Freddie: *“just dropped it in conversation, talked about girls”; “I didn’t want to censor MYSELF and have to think about it, I wanted to express my feelings about a girl”*.

Charlotte: *“it’s not my job to educate people, it’s their job”*.

In fact, waiting for others’ approval isn’t necessary:

Freddie: *“anyone who doesn’t accept you clearly isn’t good enough in your life”*.

Charlotte: *“it’s not something that I want to discuss with people”*.

Similarly, Lucas expects others to use his chosen pronouns: *“I feel very strongly that people should get my pronouns correct”*. To him, this is non-negotiable and a matter of basic respect.

Sub-Theme 5: Erasure and Prejudice

All participants described their experience of prejudice. For many, this manifests itself as small acts of hostile microaggressions, which Freddie feels is a choice *“I feel like people are being purposely ignorant”*. She also describes her experience of feeling erased as a bisexual person within the shared narrative, saying *“It was like it didn’t exist, and it took me a lot of work to find out that this is a label”*.

Lucas refers to his experience of being deadnamed after transitioning: *“the teachers I used to have...would dead name me round school”*. Charlotte describes homophobic attitudes she has encountered in school: *“I’d hear things like, lads talking how every interaction a gay man has...”* which appears to be a stigmatised view of HIV transmission between gay men. Both direct and

indirect forms of prejudice, both large and small are perceived as significant and memorable.

Encountering prejudicial attitudes is a common and universal experience:

Freddie: *“people er, tell me to pick or choose, or that I can’t be both, or that I will choose one day”*.

Charlotte: *“I’ve noticed a massive spike of like, just homophobia, and transphobia and stuff at my school”*.

Lucas: *“there’s always the thing of, because you’re trans, people who misgender you”*.

Freddie and Charlotte describe homophobic attitudes as outdated and unacceptable in modern society:

Freddie: *“I don’t see how you can...still be homophobic and have these microaggressions”*.

Charlotte: *“It’s 80s attitudes that have been passed down”*.

In comparison, Lucas, who is waiting for gender confirmation surgery, has a more pragmatic perspective, reluctantly accepting the prospect of further prejudice and stigma: *“straight girls don’t want to date a trans person”*.

Super-Ordinate Theme: Support

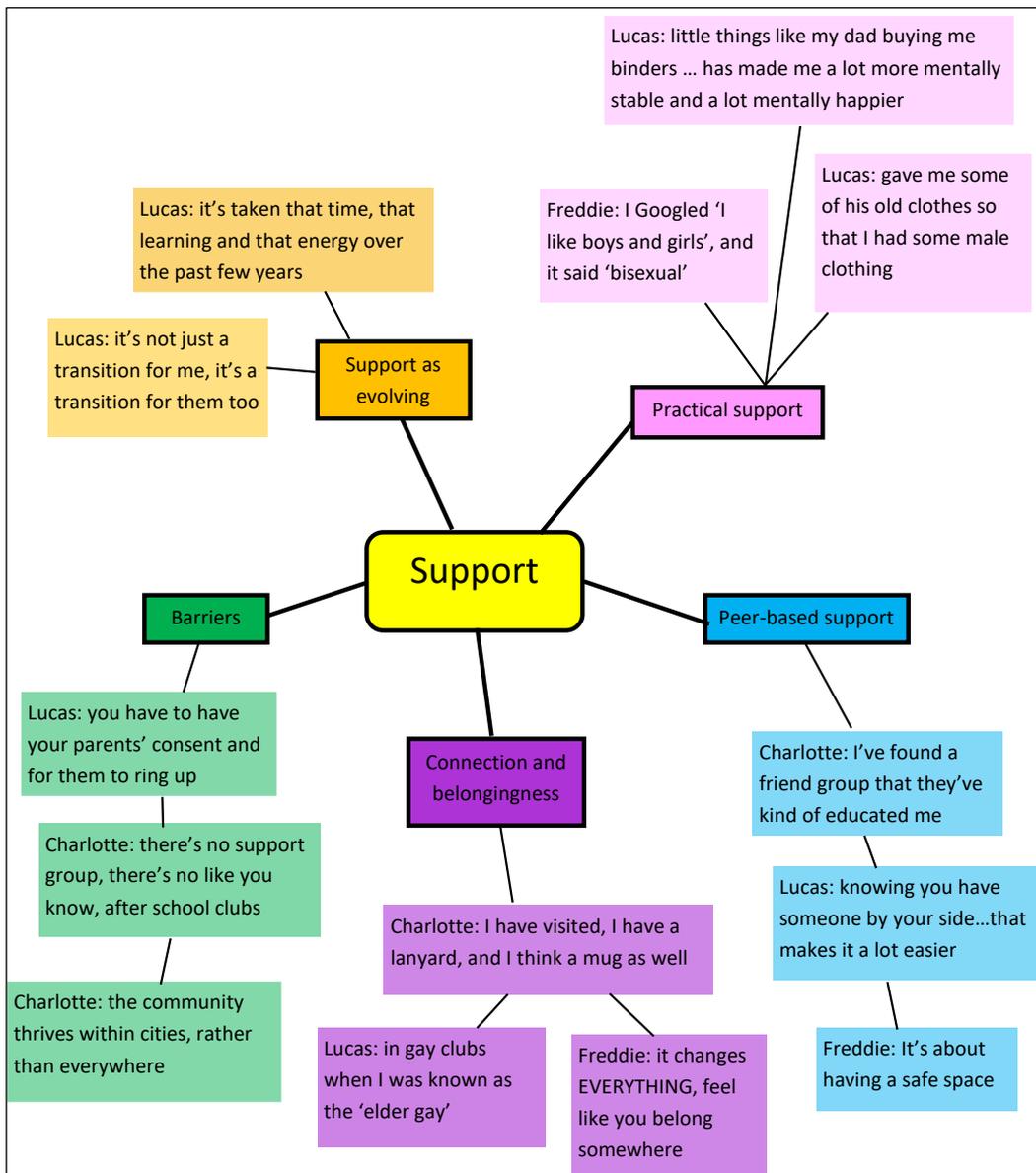
Figure 11



Support Title Page

Support was a key theme for all participants. Peer-based support was universally valued since it offered a safe environment to seek information and access emotional support, with mutual support offered within primarily LGBTQ+ peer groups. Practical support was valued by most since it offered solutions to practical problems and represented acceptance. Feeling connected to the wider LGBTQ+ community was highlighted by everyone; participants described how they have developed a sense of belongingness and the positive impact this has had. Barriers to support include a lack of agency and dependence on adults, and an absence of LGBTQ+ services in their local area, with some understanding that support can evolve over time as others adjust and seek their own forms of support.

Figure 12



Support Visual Representation

Sub-Theme 1: Practical Support

Lucas and Freddie refer to practical forms of support they have received and describe the positive impact this has had. For Lucas, this has been an important part of his transition:

“little things like my dad buying me binders...has made me a lot more mentally stable and a lot mentally happier”.

“[he] gave me some of his old clothes so that I had some male clothing”.

This support represents validation and acceptance from friends and family; for Lucas emotional support was secondary to these more essential forms of practical support, such as chest binders. At other times, practical and emotional support are more indistinguishable: *“she sat there three hours with me, helping me pick out a name”*.

Online forms of practical support were particularly valued by Lucas and Freddie, who describe how they had sought information and guidance, as a one-off and discreet form of practical support:

Lucas: *“a lot of Instagram accounts nowadays that help you actually ‘come out’”*.

Freddie: *“I Googled ‘I like boys and girls’, and it said bisexual”*.

Sub-Theme 2: Peer-Based Support

LGBTQ+ peers were universally valued as an important form of support, since they offered emotional reassurance and became an important source of information:

Charlotte: *“I’ve found a friend group that they’ve kind of educated me”; “this is this, and this is this, and you know it’s alright to feel like this”*.

Lucas: *“asking for the support of people, asking for their opinion on things”*; Lucas: *“knowing you have someone by your side...that makes it a lot easier”*.

Freddie: *“those people are probably THE most important people...in my life”*.

This was described as a mutual form of support by Freddie, who referred to having a ‘safe space’ with LGBTQ+ peers, built upon a sense of openness and mutual trust: *“I don’t have to hide this from you because you understand”*.

All participants were out to friends before choosing to ‘come out’ to their family, with this offering the opportunity to gain a sense of confidence through a more casual process of disclosure:

Charlotte: *“it’s only my friends, I kinda [kind of] had to ‘come out’ to them first”*.

Freddie: *“we both sort of realised at the same time, like, oh! We’re both gay!”, “they just sort of knew, and I knew that they were”*.

Lucas: *“a lot of them picked up before I even came out, that I wanted to be trans...that I saw myself as a boy”*.

Sub-Theme 3: Connection and Belongingness

Feeling a part of the LGBTQ+ community was universally valued by participants and described as a key form of support. Charlotte and Freddie described the sense of connection they experienced with their group of LGBTQ+ friends:

Charlotte: *“I found like, my little bubble of people”*.

Freddie: *“I’d found girls to talk to or be a part of and stuff like that”; “it changes EVERYTHING, [you] feel like you belong somewhere”*.

For Freddie, this has led to a sense that she is part of the wider LGBTQ+ community and helped to support her self-exploration: *“finding a community of people made me realise that these people aren’t gonna [going to] just see me for that”*, as she formed connections with friends who knew her whole self.

Charlotte describes how she had overcome feelings of isolation by forming online connections with members of the LGBTQ+ community, based on shared interests such as Ru Paul’s Drag Race: *“with Ru Paul’s Drag Race and stuff... there’s a massive community”*. Being online has enabled Charlotte to connect with a pre-existing LGBTQ+ community: *“there’s places online where you can like speak to fans”*. Meeting other fans of the show through platforms such as Twitter, YouTube or Instagram has created an immediate connection because of this shared interest: *“I’d see someone that I really liked the content”*. For Charlotte, this has allowed her to feel connected and offered potential for ongoing support, as she continued to explore her LGBTQ+ identity: *“I kinda [kind of] stayed connected with that, while I’ve tried to figure out”*.

When available, school-run LGBTQ+ peer support groups are an important form of support and connection. Lucas describes being a member of a support group over a long period of time, when he developed a strong sense of belonging,

warmly explaining that *“I was known as the elder gay”*, conjuring a sense of family.

Charlotte, who describes how she longed for such a group, has sought alternative places to develop a sense of connection and belongingness, such as a nearby LGBTQ+ owned charity shop which she regularly visits: *“I have visited, I have a lanyard, and I think a mug as well”*. For her, these purchases appear to have cemented a connection to this community and helped to foster a sense of belongingness. In other shops, she describes feeling a sense of connection when seeing Pride flags displayed or *“a sign in the window [window] saying that we support...everyone in the community”*.

Sub-Theme 4: Barriers

The obstacles and barriers experienced to accessing support were described by Lucas and Charlotte in particular. For Lucas, the necessity of gaining parental support when embarking upon the transition process is a very important consideration: *“you have to have your parents’ consent and for them to ring up”*. Long delays to accessing the GIDS are a current cause of frustration for Lucas: *“a two-year waiting list for the gender clinic, to even be seen”*, suggesting a consciousness that this will be the start of a much longer journey toward hormone treatment and gender confirmation surgery. As a result, and until Lucas is able to achieve the gender euphoria he describes, he is faced with a further obstacle when meeting potential partners: *“it’s a lot harder to find a significant other...that is willing to understand and learn”*.

Charlotte describes the barriers she has faced when seeking support, including the geographical isolation she feels in a semi-rural location: *“the community thrives within cities, rather than everywhere”*. Other sources of frustration originate in school, where she has experienced a general lack of support and a culture of tolerance rather than a meaningful LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum:

“there’s no support group, there’s no like you know, after school clubs”.

“they are very...you know teaching the bare minimum”.

Sub-Theme 5: Support as Evolving

Although not a universal theme, this was a significant theme for Lucas, who describes his view that the support he received from friends and family has evolved over time, as they adjust: *“it’s not just a transition for me, it’s a transition for them too”*. For Lucas, the consideration that his parents have needed to access their own forms of support as part of their adjustment is important: *“He educates himself on the things he doesn’t know as well”* and has been worthwhile: *“over time, he became one of the most supportive ones”*. While this appears to have been a validating experience for Lucas, it has also come at a price: *“it’s taken that time, that learning and that energy over the past few years”*; *“the worst part was...having those old people learn over time”*.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the research following the analysis process. The themes and sub-themes were summarised, with the four super-ordinate themes explored in detail, illustrated by participant-generated collages and explored using quotations from interview transcripts. The findings attempt to answer the previously generated research questions and will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter, with reference to the literature. Strengths and limitations of the research will be considered, and possibilities for future research will be suggested.

Reflective box:

The interpretive process highlighted the need for me to ensure I was not imprinting my own experiences onto those of the participants. Participants described emotionally charged experiences which I could relate to on a deep and personal level, and I found myself developing a great deal of empathy as I connected with them, particularly during the interview process, but also when initially listening back to the recording. Following the stages outlined by Smith et al. (2009) supported me to emotionally 'step back', and to analyse the actual detail of what was being said in a more rational and detached way, before returning to the wider themes or events being described. Throughout this process, it was important to remain reflexive by responding to new information, rather than holding on to my initial thoughts which many have been clouded by my own feelings. I feel that this non-linear process enhanced the strength of interpretations I subsequently made.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

The previous chapter offered an overview of the study findings, using a visual approach to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents. This chapter will reconsider the research questions and explore connections between the research findings and current literature.

Revisiting the Aims and Research Questions

The research aimed to hear the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents so that the supportive factors and barriers to emotional well-being and resilience could be better understood. I hoped to identify ways in which LGBTQ+ identifying CYP could be effectively supported by understanding the interconnected environmental systems which influence well-being and contribute to feelings of resilience. Through the use of visual research methods, the experiences of three LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents were explored. These experiences were analysed in order to generate themes, which will now be used to respond to each research question developed as a result of the literature review.

RQ1: How do LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents perceive their noteworthy experiences of themselves in relation to others?

'Coming out' and Acceptance

Participants described the need to embark upon an internal process of self-exploration and self-acceptance before they felt able to 'come out' to others. Kauth (2022) highlights the role shame often plays for LGBTQ+ people, suggesting that although identity concealment may help an individual to avoid the experience of prejudice, discrimination and violence, it prevents the person from experiencing validation. They propose that secret keeping, through concealment of their LGBTQ+ identity creates and further reinforces feelings of shame and contributes to feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness.

In their study of young people's experiences and perceptions of self-managing their mental health, Town et al. (2021) identify 'wanting to wallow' as a sub-theme, with 'self' perceived as a barrier to self-management. It could be argued that participants in the current study sought to protect their mental health through self-isolation, creating a barrier to engaging in more positive self-management techniques.

The disclosure of sexual and/or gender identity to family members was a significant experience for all participants since it represented what they perceived as an endpoint of self-acceptance. Additionally, participants described the mutual and implicit acceptance within peer groups of largely LGBTQ+ individuals. This has made 'coming out' an unnecessary formality, replaced with a shared assumption that everyone is LGBTQ+, with specific labels often unimportant. No pressure to adopt a defining label was perceived within these peer groups, perhaps reflecting the rejection of a binary and fixed understanding of sexual and gender identity, as suggested by Simula et al. (2020).

The continually evolving way LGBTQ+ individuals socially construct gender identity and sexual identity is highlighted by Garrett-Walker and Montagno (2021). This study notes a generational difference between Generation Z and Millennials, with Generation Z more likely to report an expansive gender and sexual identity. This represents a move away from traditional binary labels which define sexual and gender identity.

The atmosphere of acceptance and diversity enjoyed within peer groups contrasts with the more formal experience of 'coming out' to family members. The sense of freedom and simple acceptance experienced among friends was replaced with a fear of judgement and rejection from family members. The reality of 'coming out' has not always matched expectations, with initial reactions of others not always perceived as supportive. Participants described a reluctance to repeatedly 'come out' to different family members, partly because of the subsequent need to support their process of education and journey towards acceptance. Some directly challenged the need to 'come out' altogether, citing cisnormative and heteronormative societal expectations, describing their desire to challenge these norms in the future by not using a label as an act of resistance.

Lucas described 'coming out' as trans as a very different experience in comparison to disclosing his sexual identity. He was acutely aware of the requirement for parental support in order to access practical support and begin the process of transitioning, making 'coming out' a necessity for more pragmatic reasons than simply seeking acceptance from family. For instance, 'coming out' to his parents has enabled Lucas to legally change his pronouns and name at school and begin the long process of gender confirmation treatment.

Participants described ambivalent feelings about disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity when meeting new people. This supports the view that minority stress is universal (Cardona et al., 2021), as LGBTQ+ people negotiate their interactions within a cisnormative and heteronormative culture, and experience the stress caused by needing to assess the risk of being 'out' in every new social situation (Kauth, 2022). A desire to disrupt heteronormativity was described by challenging the societal expectation to 'come out' altogether. This appears to be the cause of internal conflict between a desire to live openly and authentically while not wishing to perpetuate the marginalisation of the LGBTQ+ community by 'coming out'.

The way participants described how they manage the risk of rejection could be interpreted as a form of hypervigilance, which is defined as "a chronic and pervasive state of alertness and readiness to respond to potential threats in the environment" (Rostosky et al., 2021, p. 1). This relates to minority stress theory, which proposes that the mental health of LGBTQ+ people is compromised by having to live in a chronically "hostile and stressful" social environment (Meyer, 2003, p. 674). In their study exploring the experience of hypervigilance among LGBTQ+ people, Rostosky et al. (2021) found that it acted as a coping mechanism for perceived threats to safety and supported individuals to develop a greater sense of agency and control with the people they meet. They suggest that hypervigilance can be best understood as the response to the lived experience of stigma as a form of insidious trauma and highlight that it does not necessitate any feelings of immediate danger.

An Evolving Identity

Developing an awareness of sexual and gender identity was universally described as a process of self-discovery by participants before 'coming out' to

friends or family. Although they described reaching a final point of self-understanding before telling others, this conceptualisation of self-discovery is challenged by Rosenberg (2018), who argues that ‘coming out’ does not represent the end point of self-discovery for many people. Rosenberg describes a lifelong search for identity, which is a “nonlinear, constantly shifting, and ever-deepening process of self-discovery” within a wider context of “contending with external and internal pressures to self-categorize and settle, paired with social discrimination and stigma” (Rosenberg, 2018, p. 1807). This description supports Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1992), which highlights the bidirectional interplay between different environmental systems, such as the immediate microsystem (including school, family and peers) and the wider exosystem (such as neighbourhood and mass media). In his later adaptation, Bronfenbrenner proposes a fifth level, known as the chronosystem, which highlights the significance of environmental changes a person experiences over the duration of their lifetime, such as major life transitions and historical events (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

The process of self-discovery participants described could be considered a battle to validate inner desires and overcome the pressures of living in a heteronormative society. Rosenberg (2018) describes the pressure to assimilate these social pressures and how many people do so by either silencing their desires to avoid conflict or adopting a more simplified way of being which is fixed and binary and lacks any ambiguity: being the “totally gay” person (Rosenberg, 2018, p. 1807). As a result, Rosenberg suggests that many LGBTQ+ people are prevented from being able to fully explore their identity and live authentically.

The Flexible Use of Labels

A non-binary and flexible understanding of gender and sexual identity was described by participants, demonstrated through the use of several self-identified labels. Charlotte explained how she simultaneously identified with multiple non-binary labels, including bisexual, pansexual and queer, all of which can be used to describe attraction to more than one gender. Her use of terminology relating to bisexuality is reflected by Stonewall (2022), who recently defined ‘bi’ as an umbrella term which includes other labels such as pan and

queer. Bi is not simply a short-hand version of bisexual; it incorporates attraction to more than one gender and recognises the existence of multiple genders, not just men and women (House et al., 2022). This is consistent with research which has found that bi people commonly use multiple labels (Feinstein et al., 2021). Lucas and Freddie defined themselves using multiple labels, including gay, bi and bisexual. For them, 'gay' is an umbrella term which is short-hand for any group within the LGBTQ+ acronym. Identifying as bi or gay, therefore, represents a move away from restrictive fixed and binary labels.

However, definitions of labels such as bisexual, pansexual, and queer vary; some people differentiate between them, while others do not (Feinstein et al., 2021). In their study of queer-identifying young people in the United States, Goldberg et al. (2020) found this group were overwhelmingly cisgender women and genderqueer or non-binary people and were more likely to be younger. They concluded that 'queer' should be considered a distinct sexual identity in its own right (Goldberg et al., 2020).

In their recent paper, House et al. (2022) highlight the importance of using self-identified labels since they are understood and defined differently by those who use them. Further, they noted that many people use different labels depending on social context and support the use of the umbrella term 'plurisexual' to describe individuals who are or have the potential to be attracted to more than one gender. This term incorporates other labels such as bisexual, pansexual and fluid, allows for flexibility and overlaps between labels, and is considered less problematic than using bi as a similar umbrella term since it does not marginalise other identities (House et al., 2022).

Stigmatised Perceptions of Bisexuality

This study offers an exploration of the lived experiences of bisexual identifying people, with all participants describing their use of this label. Awareness of negative attitudes within society about bisexual people was described, particularly by Freddie, who referred to a sense of bi-erasure and how this contributes to a lack of bisexual visibility in mainstream culture. Societal perceptions of bisexual people were explored by Callis (2013), who found that they are commonly viewed as dangerous and hypersexual and identified a general perception that bisexuality is illegitimate and limiting. Callis describes

how these views cause a stigmatising view of bisexuality, further delegitimising it and preventing people from identifying as such or accepting this identity when others disclose it.

The pressure faced by bisexual identifying people to adopt or portray a non-bisexual identity is described by Boccone (2016), with the identity of an individual's partner perceived by others as the defining feature of sexual identity. This is viewed as a source of shame and confusion for bisexual identifying people, heightening their feelings of anxiety when 'coming out'. These issues are described as the "bisexual burden" by Anderson and McCormack (2016) since they are not experienced by those who are attracted to a single gender. However, it is noted that anyone who identifies as non-binary may also experience these pressures.

A Shared Experience of Microaggressions

Lucas' reflections about being deadnamed by his brother highlight the impact of hostile microaggressions toward LGBTQ+ people. Being misgendered through deadnaming is listed as one of five categories in a recently developed scale of non-binary microaggressions (Croteau & Morrison, 2022). People who frequently experience these microaggressions are at greater risk of reduced self-esteem, depression, anxiety and stress (Lui, & Quezada, 2019).

Research into the nature and impact of microaggressions suggests that they are likely to be experienced differently by different groups within the LGBTQ+ umbrella acronym (Croteau & Morrison, 2022). In their study of LGB people, Wright and Wegner (2012) found that microaggressions result in reduced self-esteem, both in the short and long term. Furthermore, this study found the higher the frequency of microaggressions, the greater the detrimental impact on an individual's self-esteem.

The experience of microaggressions among bisexual and non-binary people may be similar since they both challenge socially constructed binaries, resulting in microaggressions which suggest they are not a legitimate identity or are invisible (Croteau & Morrison, 2022). Microaggressions directed towards transgender people have been found to have specific and unique themes, including transphobic language (such as purposeful misgendering and

deadnaming), discomfort and disapproval, endorsement of gender normative culture, assumption of a universal trans experience, exoticism, denial of the existence of transphobia, physical threat and harassment, assumption of abnormality and invasion of bodily privacy (Nadal et al., 2012).

RQ2: How do LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents experience support at school, online and at home?

Access to Peer-Based Support

Feeling part of the wider LGBTQ+ community was important for all participants. They described how connecting with other LGBTQ+ young people supported them in developing a sense of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Peer connections have acted as a critical source of practical information and created a 'safe space' to explore identity and develop self-acceptance. Most commonly, this has been achieved by building LGBTQ+ friendship groups in school or college, as like-minded people have organically gravitated towards each other to offer mutual support and acceptance. Participants referred to the implicit acceptance at the core of these connections, removing any need to confirm or define their sexuality and gender identity by 'coming out'. As a result, they felt able to freely explore their identity without experiencing peer pressure to define themselves, which would feel constraining.

It can be suggested that finding other LGBTQ+ people has helped participants to create a sense of social acceptance, which has then supported them to normalise their queerness (Rosenberg, 2018). In their research of resilience among LGBTQ+ youth, Robinson and Schmitz (2021) describe how social connections with other LGBTQ+ people help foster a collective LGBTQ+ identity, which in turn enables them to contextualise the difficulties they may experience rather than blaming themselves.

In Lucas' case, being a member of a school-based LGBTQ+ peer support group has helped him to develop a sense of connection and community, referring to himself as an 'elder', which indicates his sense of family and the long-term positive impact it has had. LGBTQ+ peer support groups have been found to contribute to an enhanced sense of belonging to the school community (McCabe & Anhalt, 2022). Peer support groups are considered critical in

promoting agency and resilience among LGBTQ+ youth, with affirmative framing of gender and sexual identity offsetting the harm of discrimination and marginalisation, particularly when deep and meaningful social connections are formed (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021).

In contrast, the absence of a support group of this kind has negatively impacted Charlotte's experience of school, with her describing her perception that LGBTQ+ students are only tolerated and not fully accepted. For her, a support group would demonstrate acceptance and be perceived as validating. She described her experience of feeling geographically isolated from the LGBTQ+ 'community', and how she has acted to overcome these feelings and achieved a sense of belonging by regularly visiting LGBTQ+ run shops and visiting LGBTQ+ inclusive establishments in her local area.

Family, peer and community-based support is considered a major protective factor for LGBTQ+ CYP, particularly through their self-exploration and 'coming out' process (Hobaica et al., 2018). This study found that a lack of support in any one of these areas can be overcome by fostering greater support within the others, which can then help them to develop self-acceptance and resilience against adversity. The current research supports this suggestion, with Charlotte overcoming an absence of peer-based support in school by fostering connections online and through community-based links to the LGBTQ+ community.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube were important forms of support, with all participants describing how they have used the internet to access information or advice and connect with others with shared interests. Reassurance, advice and information were described as freely and immediately available by Lucas, who perceived it as a resource to access when the need arises. In contrast, Charlotte valued her ability to form ongoing connections with others who have shared interests. The value of social media is described by McCabe and Anhalt (2022). They describe it as an important way for LGBTQ+ youth to find 'safe spaces' to connect with like-minded people while supporting them to express their individuality. The current study suggests that social media is perceived as a valuable source of information and support for LGBTQ+ adolescents and is used flexibly according to individual needs.

The Power of LGBTQ+ Visibility and Representation

Diverse LGBTQ+ visibility and representation within popular culture were perceived to be especially significant and were valued highly by participants. In particular, bisexual visibility was described as particularly impactful by Freddie and Charlotte, which may be reflective of stigmatised views of bisexual people. Since they are often perceived as being undecided or living 'between' other categories of sexual orientation, bisexual people face additional and unique barriers which make visibility extremely difficult (Boccone, 2016). In addition, Boccone suggests that bisexual people often gravitate toward their partner's identity and face societal pressures to do so, resulting in reduced bisexual visibility within society. This may help to understand why Freddie and Charlotte perceive bisexual invisibility in society.

The current study found both contemporary and historical visibility of bisexuality was significant, with Freddie feeling a sense of connection with David Bowie and Freddie Mercury. For her, role models such as Bowie provide a powerful form of validation, and by connecting with him through online interviews and his music, she has felt empowered to explore and express her bisexual identity. Similarly, Charlotte perceives Lady Gaga as an important role model, with her popularity and success representing bisexual legitimacy and acceptance.

In 2011, Gomillion and Giuliano found a link between the media and lesbian, gay and bisexual identities. They argue that positive LGB role models in the media foster a positive identity among these groups. Positive visibility in the form of 'out' celebrities is described as a crucial influence on LGB identity, which can enhance feelings of self-worth and improve self-esteem. Although this study focuses on LGB individuals, these findings are arguably appropriate for all LGBTQ+ identities, accepting that diverse (and positive) representation and visibility are necessary for all people to feel seen and accepted.

The Significance of Pronouns

Other people's use of their chosen pronouns was described a key indicator of LGBTQ+ inclusivity by Lucas and Charlotte. Being asked what their gender pronouns are when meeting new people was considered a powerful measure of inclusivity and acceptance and a short-hand way of assessing their sense of

safety in new environments. This was modelled by most participants during our initial meeting when they asked what my pronouns were, perhaps hoping I would do the same in return. Errors and mistakes when using gender pronouns were described as common and inevitable, even among friends and family. In this instance, the perceived intent was the most important factor; it was easily forgivable unless they were being purposefully misgendered.

However, the use of gender-diverse pronouns does not make an environment inclusive in itself. The need for a systemic approach is highlighted by Rodman and DasGupta (2022), who advocate for what they refer to as 'gender liberation' rather than seeing inclusivity as the goal. Achieving gender liberation would arguably also require other forms of oppression such as racism and colonialism to be simultaneously deconstructed, since they are linked and mutually reinforcing (Nicolazzo, 2019).

RQ3: What can educational psychologists learn about supporting LGBTQ+ CYP from the perceived experiences of adolescents in this group?

Implications for Educational Psychologists

Yavuz (2016) suggests that EPs are well positioned to support LGBTQ+ young people, since they have the ability to consider how they interact with the wider systems they operate within, such as their family, school and community. Further, EPs are able to share recent research developments and related recommendations with others (Yavuz, 2016).

The BPS reports that EPs should "recognise the needs and issues of young people from gender and sexual minorities, and their particular vulnerabilities" (BPS, 2017, p. 34). However, Russell (2005) recommends a move away from this deficit approach to supporting LGBTQ+ CYP. Robinson and Schmitz also propose a shift to a strength-based approach, focused upon "the multiple contexts, factors, and levels that shape both risk and resilience for young people" (2021, p. 2). It is therefore important for EPs to consider and explore the multiple systems which interact with these CYP.

When considering the support an EP might offer gender-diverse CYP, Yavuz proposes that:

There should really be little reason why an educational psychologist would need to work directly with the young person other than if their voice is not being heard or if the educational psychologist is required to advocate on their behalf (2016, p. 403).

Gathering the views of CYP is a central part of the EP role; EPs are familiar with a range of methods to enable a CYP to share their voice, which they select in response to the individual needs of the CYP. The tools used by EPs to elicit voice were reviewed by Harding and Atkinson (2009), who reported the use of discussion-based methods, task-related activities, therapeutic approaches and indirect methods. The development of tools to enable pupil voice was advocated since this was considered key to encouraging CYP to play an active role in their education.

The presented research adopted a creative approach to supporting CYP to explore and share their experiences rather than simply asking them to describe thoughts through the use of direct questioning. This creative approach supported meaningful conversations and could be used to encourage CYP to share their views during the psychological assessment process. Participants responded positively to the creative process of collage-making, with some describing therapeutic benefits and how they were able to understand their experiences in new ways.

In their descriptions of 'coming out' and family-based support, some participants described a need to support family members as they embarked upon a process of education. Participants shared a varied experience of acceptance with their families and described how this often took time and patience. Through the application of psychological approaches within the consultation process, EPs could facilitate this process of acceptance by supporting families to explore their feelings when their child has shared their LGBTQ+ identity. In addition, this would enable EPs to signpost parents to organisations where they can access other resources, such as parent support groups which have been found to improve well-being and reduce feelings of isolation (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015).

Government legislation requires primary schools to teach children about family diversity, including LGBTQ+ people, and teach sexual orientation and gender diversity at secondary school (Department for Education [DfE], 2019), (2019). The need for teacher training in this area is advocated by Goldstein-Schultz (2022), who found teachers often feel uncomfortable teaching LGBTQ+ issues and recommend opportunities for in-service training which enables teachers to explore their attitudes, beliefs and biases. EPs would be well situated to deliver training designed to support teachers in exploring these topics and sensitively challenge attitudes based on prejudice or stigmatised views.

Participants described how important positive LGBTQ+ visibility and representation were in helping them to accept and understand themselves. Consideration should therefore be given to ensure that diversity of representation is achieved across all curriculum areas, rather than teaching LGBTQ+ 'issues' within a discreet subject or lesson. By widening the curriculum in this way, schools could foster an environment in which gender stereotypes can be challenged, and cisnormativity and heteronormativity can be replaced with an LGBTQ+ inclusive culture (Formby, 2015).

A shift toward challenging heteronormativity rather than seeking tolerance was recommended by DePalma and Atkinson (2009) in their 'no outsiders' study in UK-based primary schools. This study examined the impact of 'small acts of resistance' which challenge wider cisnormative and heteronormative practices within schools. It is argued that these individual acts create a culture which can collectively shape and change school culture over time. The study refers to this phenomenon as "a praxis-oriented collective endeavour" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 852), which represents a move away from fighting for LGBTQ+ acceptance. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as 'queering the classroom', which advocates for systemic change rather than individual acts of inclusion such as establishing LGBTQ+ peer support groups, which is considered little more than a 'band-aid' within a heteronormative school culture (Malmquist et al., 2013).

Although LGBTQ+ peer support groups were regarded highly by participants in the presented research, Goldstein-Schultz (2022) argues that they do not generate a school-wide culture of inclusivity in themselves; a more holistic approach is necessary for this to develop. Instead, a systemic approach is recommended through the development of inclusion and gender equality

policies which would establish an environment which feels safe for all CYP, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Formby (2015) suggests that policy development should not simply consider ways of addressing HBT bullying but challenge all forms of oppression and normativity. This would address the experience of hostile microaggressions highlighted by participants and contribute to a school culture that encourages openness and promotes the development of a community rooted in inclusion and acceptance (Johnson, 2022). Embedding these values within policy has been shown to reduce the experience of LGBTQ+ discrimination and victimisation (Kosciw et al., 2012).

The presented research highlights how young people are increasingly challenging traditional notions of gender and sexual identity through a flexible and evolving use of non-binary labels. This reflects the ever-evolving use of terminology to describe gender identity and sexual identity, which is being led by the current generation of LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents. This is supported by Flanders et al. (2017) who describe how LGBTQ+ young people are complicating definitions of sexual identity to become more expansive, inclusive and fluid. The BPS recommends that EPs should be aware that “attitudes towards sex, sexuality and gender are located in a changing social, cultural, and political context, and to reflect on their own understanding of these concepts and how it may impact their practice” (BPS, 2017, p. 34). Seeking a singular and fixed definition or understanding of sexual and gender identities is an unhelpful and impossible goal within this changing context; remaining informed about current research developments in this area is essential for EPs to ensure support for LGBTQ+ CYP is effective and has the greatest impact.

Summary

This chapter has presented a discussion of the study findings in relation to literature and theory. The following chapter will consider the conclusions and recommendations for practice and explore possible research limitations.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

Overview

The previous chapter discussed the study findings in relation to key literature and psychological theory. This chapter aims to present the conclusions from the research and explore possible limitations. Implications for future practice, and dissemination of the research findings will be considered and recommendations for future research will be described.

Conclusions

Through the use of visual methods and IPA, this study aimed to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents. The research outlined the similarities and differences between the experiences of three participants. The findings highlight how the current generation of LGBTQ+ adolescents are increasingly adopting non-binary labels to describe their sexual identity and gender identity. A fluid identity was described, which was representative of a desire to challenge a heterosexual and cisgender status quo. Rather than indicating a wish to assimilate into what they consider to be a limiting and binary view of gender and sexual identity, a sense of freedom was considered important. This research is indicative of a generational shift toward a non-binary understanding of gender identity and sexuality, which LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents are leading (Chan & Farmer, 2017; House et al., 2022).

Participants described their experience of isolation, confusion and shame and how they initially embarked upon a process of reflection. Reaching a point of self-acceptance was significant, with peer-based support playing a central role in enabling them to feel safe to explore their LGBTQ+ identity. Participants described how they achieved a sense of connection and belongingness to the LGBTQ+ community, with peer support groups and connecting with others using online platforms such as Instagram proving important sources of support and information. These findings support those of Steinke et al. (2017), who highlight the importance of online communities for LGBTQ+ youth seeking

information and support and how they can become alternative attachment groups for isolated LGBTQ+ individuals.

Inclusive practices within educational settings and within the wider community were felt to be a powerful indicator of acceptance. The use of language such as chosen pronouns was highlighted as especially important in this regard; their use was considered a quick measure of being in a 'safe space'. However, a desire for a more holistic approach was also described, which would address the experience of tokenism and frustration caused by a predominately cisnormative and heteronormative school culture (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Formby, 2015; Johnson, 2022).

This study highlights the importance of positive LGBTQ+ representation and visibility, particularly non-binary identities such as bisexuality and pansexuality. A lack of visible non-binary LGBTQ+ role models was described as a form of erasure and was perceived as marginalising by participants. This supports the findings of Pennasilico (2019), who highlights how bisexual people experience 'mononormativity', describing how others often assume them to be either gay or heterosexual. This echoes the 'bisexual burden' described by Anderson and McCormack (2016) and highlights how stigmatised views are often held towards bisexual people and other non-binary identities (Callis, 2013).

The themes raised within this research should be considered when seeking to support LGBTQ+ CYP and within the development of inclusive educational settings. The points outlined should be shared with those who work with all CYP in educational settings to develop a sustained and school-wide approach to disrupting cisnormativity and heteronormativity (Johnson, 2022).

Evaluation of the Research

Recruitment

Gaining access to the gatekeeper of a pre-existing LGBTQ+ support group proved difficult. Despite initially positive conversations, without meeting face-to-face, it was challenging to gain official approval. Many of these groups were not meeting in person, and my request may have felt poorly timed because of ongoing school lockdowns due to COVID-19. Although I was often able to

speak with an enthusiastic staff member, the gatekeeper was the head teacher at the school. Without being able to meet them to explain the nature of the research, it was impossible to develop trust. The sensitive topic of study and the vulnerable status of the potential participants may have caused further hesitancy.

Once I had successfully gained approval from the gatekeeper of an existing support group, I was reliant upon them to promote the research in my absence. Ethical approval stipulated that I should not directly approach potential participants; they were required to talk to their parents about their interest in the research and ask them to contact me. I was, therefore, dependent upon several factors aligning in my favour.

When a parent of a potential participant contacted me, they had already decided they would like to participate in the research. This meant that recruitment was always successful once I had been contacted and there were very few questions about the study. However, I was unable to access any participants or parents who were interested but unsure to discuss the research in greater detail. 'Word of mouth' became increasingly important within the recruitment process, with parents of one potential participant speaking with another. When one participant had been recruited, this resulted in conversations between parents who had already met with me and could advocate on my behalf.

Since I was seeking to recruit LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents aged 11 to 18, parental approval was required for their participation. This meant participants needed to be 'out' to their parents and have their support. Since I was particularly hoping to represent diverse LGBTQ+ identities within the research, this became a limitation of the research. In reality, recruiting participants who were as yet unsure of their LGBTQ+ identity and therefore not 'out', and those who may have been 'out' but not supported by their parents proved impossible due to the ethical considerations designed to protect these same individuals.

Conducting Research as an LGBTQ+ Community Member

The potential risks of conducting research within a community as a community member have been highlighted by Rosenberg (2018), including assuming prior knowledge and thereby missing significant data, insider blindness and crossing professional boundaries. Rosenberg suggests these risks can be mitigated by

engaging in reflexive practices such as journaling, accessing the support of other researchers, considering one's own identity and how that might affect positionality and consulting others on best practices.

Within the current research, I have been conscious to avoid assuming I understand without genuinely listening to what is being said. I have reflected upon this in discussion with other researchers and have reflected upon my thoughts during the process within my research journal. Within this reflective process, I have noted that although I am gay, I am a member of an older generation that perhaps holds a more binary understanding of gender and sexual identity than many adolescents today. Realising this has supported me in avoiding assumptions about our shared experience. In addition, I feel the detailed and multi-step nature of IPA has acted as a protective measure against any assumptions I may have made.

During the research, I have been conscious of the empathy I have felt towards participants, which enhanced the rigour of the research (Smith, 2015). The shared experience of 'coming out', isolation and journey towards self-acceptance were a powerful source of empathy, supported a greater sense of intimacy and safety, and hopefully encouraged participants to share in a more profound way, as suggested by Rosenberg (2018). All participants described their experience of taking part in favourable terms, and I feel that being a member of the community I was researching contributed to this.

Use of Visual Methods

The presented research utilised collage as a means of supporting participants to explore and share their experiences visually. Rather than being considered data in its own right, I hoped that using visual methods would result in enriched verbal data by encouraging participants to access and share themes and events that may not have emerged through interviews alone (Grover, 2004). In practice, how participants engaged with the virtual collage process varied. Through informal discussion following the semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged to share their reflections and comments about the experience.

All participants described their collage-making experience in positive overall terms, describing it as "*quite fun*" (Lucas), "*they helped*" (Freddie), and "*a welcome challenge*" (Charlotte). Some found the collage-making process

helped to process and organise their experiences, particularly Lucas, who felt that the collage process enabled him to *“make more connections with different things”* and talk in more detail during his interview: *“I felt I could explain a bit more”*.

For some, being asked to create a collage before talking in more depth was initially frustrating. Charlotte found the collage-making session an obstacle to talking openly about her experiences and was more comfortable talking about her experiences than representing them visually, saying *“I work in words not images”*. She often described her experiences using metaphor and imagery, and although I urged her to consider how she might represent these experiences visually, she preferred not to. In response, I tentatively began adding to the collage using images which matched her descriptions and then sought feedback from her about their accuracy. Charlotte responded positively to this adaptation, and it enabled us to return to these themes during the subsequent semi-structured interview rather than potentially losing them.

Therefore, a reflexive approach was needed to support participants in their engagement with the collage-making process. Any initial reluctance to engage with the process was usually overcome, as rapport and connection built between us as researcher and participant. A sense of playful exploration was needed for participants to engage fully, which may have initially felt unsafe and exposing until trust had been established.

Any challenges faced while making the collages felt worthwhile in the longer term, with them becoming powerful representations of their inner world: *“they showed how I feel”* (Freddie). For Charlotte, the collage-making activity reduced any pressure she may have felt during the recorded interview, describing it as *“nice and relaxed”*, perhaps because she had already had the opportunity to reflect and organise her ideas: *“I wasn’t sitting thinking”*.

From the position of researcher, having a collage as a mutual point of reference during the semi-structured interviews supported me to ask insightful questions, which I feel enhanced the quality of the subsequent conversations. The imagery chosen by participants was often powerful and evocative, enabling a deeper connection with the experience being described. This mutual connection with the collage, which had often become a collaborative exercise, helped to bridge the gap caused by conducting research remotely. The shared point of reference

within the interviews may have supported participants to maintain their sense of emotional safety as they shared traumatic or difficult experiences by acting as a distancing technique.

User confidence with the virtual platform chosen to create the collage varied between participants, which may have affected the level of engagement. Lucas confidently created dynamic and multi-dimensional collages with ease. In contrast, Charlotte and Freddie were unfamiliar with this software which created an initial barrier to the process. Although all participants were encouraged to experiment and familiarise themselves with it before the session, this did not overcome this difficulty, highlighting my assumption that all adolescents are proficient IT users.

Internet-Based Methods

As previously highlighted, a series of adaptations were made to allow for remote data collection, which was a prerequisite for ethical approval. The implications of conducting research remotely were carefully considered since I felt that they could impact the data quality and participants' engagement. Video conferencing was used throughout the research process, with a virtual digital whiteboard used within the collage-making activity.

Willig (2013) refers to the danger of losing non-verbal communication when conducting online research and the potential this has for misunderstandings and misinterpretation. This became apparent during the semi-structured interview when participants were encouraged to refer to their collages as a way of accessing themes or events they had previously identified as significant. It was important to ensure I was focused on the participant's video at these times rather than their collage so I could consider the significance of non-verbal communication such as body language and gesture.

Participants found the remote nature of research enhanced their experience overall. Both Lucas and Charlotte valued how they could remain in their 'safe space' by engaging in the research from their bedroom. Participants were familiar with home learning and video meeting platforms because of school closures caused by COVID-19, so they were arguably already aware of the benefits of this way of working: "*for me it was easy because of COVID*" (Freddie). Although it would "*have been fun*" to do the research in person (Lucas), working online was not uncommon at the time of the research. Perhaps

because of this, all participants described their interview experience in positive terms: “*straightforward and easy*” (Freddie), “*more relaxed*” (Charlotte) and “*comfortable*” (Lucas). Being remote arguably increased my ability to enter into the participant’s inner world (Smith et al., 2009), which would not have been possible if the research had taken place within a school.

The collage-making experience was undoubtedly affected by the need to carry out research using online methods. Google Jamboard was selected as the most suitable online platform since it allowed participants to add and manipulate images and text and allowed for layering in a similar way to traditional forms of collage. However, user confidence varied among participants. In reality, the creative experience of searching for images was very different from looking through magazines for images they might use within a collage. Participants needed to conceive what they wished to create before searching for it.

Creating layered and multi-dimensional images required a high level of IT proficiency and additional time investment from participants, which was not felt worthwhile since the collages were not considered data in their own right; their aim was to enrich the verbal data from the subsequent interviews. Despite the limitations of working online, the collages can be considered successful; on the participants’ terms, they achieved this aim.

The initial collage-making session enhanced the sense of trust and rapport between myself and the participant and allowed for a more informal conversation to develop. This gave the participants a chance to communicate a sense of who they were and for me to connect with them through the collage-making process. I felt this helped to create a sense of ease and reduce possible feelings of anxiety. Rapport was therefore enhanced through this initial session, as the participant developed a sense of trust and safety, and we got to know each other. Without meeting face to face, trust was perhaps initially more difficult to establish. Although an initial informal chat had already taken place, the potential for rapport felt constrained by the inability to be in the same room and perhaps took longer to achieve than was desirable. However, by the time the participant was participating in their semi-structured interview, a sense of trust and rapport had built between us.

The interview itself felt successful and unhindered by taking part remotely. Any initial difficulties relating to flow improved as I responded to how much

processing time each participant required and how fluid they were within their responses. Often, one open question relating to a section of collage enabled the participant to talk freely and at length about a theme or significant experience. However, not being in the same room meant that many non-verbal cues such as body language were largely inaccessible, making it difficult to monitor how vulnerable a participant might be feeling or understand whether silence indicated being lost in thought or simply having nothing to say.

Undoubtedly, conducting research online enhanced accessibility for participants; meetings were possible during evenings and weekends, making them more informal in nature than they may have felt at school. Participants could engage in the research from their 'safe space' and at a time which suited them, supported by but independent from their parents. The sense of privacy and safety this enabled was important; it supported participants to talk openly and honestly.

Unique Contribution

Evidence of impact is considered a core feature of qualitative research validity (Yardley, 2008). This research aimed to explore the significant and meaningful experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents. I hoped to identify the features which support this diverse group of individuals to thrive. Through a sensitive exploration of these factors, I endeavoured to build upon pre-existing knowledge in this field.

Existing research in this area is often focused on the experiences of one group within the wider LGBTQ+ acronym and not inclusive of non-binary identities (Travers et al., 2020). An exploration of recent literature in this area described a growing tendency for LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents to avoid labelling themselves using binary definitions (ONS, 2021). This highlights a need for research which explores the experiences of non-binary, fluid and questioning adolescents who identify under the LGBTQ+ umbrella acronym since they are currently underrepresented. I hope that considering these underrepresented groups has broadened existing research in this field.

The evolving use of terminology used by adolescents to describe sexual and gender identity (Koenig, 2019) has been explored in the presented research. In

doing so, I have contributed to the literature in this area. Participants demonstrated how they are redefining their use of labels which describe their LGBTQ+ identity, which is perhaps representative of the increasingly fluid understanding of gender and sexual identity they describe.

The characteristics of support which LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents value have been explored within the current research, with consideration given to how these young people access support and information online, at school and in their homes. I hope that by doing so, I have contributed to the discussion of how LGBTQ+ youth develop resilience.

This research has an added contribution in its use of visual and creative tools within research with non-binary, fluid and questioning LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents, which has enhanced the literature in this area. It has highlighted areas of similarity and difference and discussed future research possibilities. In doing so, I have added to the evolving literature in this field and contributed to the ongoing discussion of how EPs can best support LGBTQ+ identifying CYP.

Recommendations for Practice

It has been suggested that the modest conclusions which are possible from effective interviews are of a more reliable quality than quantitative research methods in social sciences (Chamberlain et al., 2008). Unlike positivist research which seeks to offer generalisable findings, it is argued that the value of research with a contextual constructionist methodology such as IPA lies within its capacity to “provide a rich and comprehensive description of a phenomenon which communicates to its readers a sense of its quality and texture” (Willig, 2013, p. 174).

The research aimed to ensure participants felt their contributions were meaningful and would be of the greatest impact. In conversation following the interview process and during the feedback session in which I shared the initial research themes, I explored the wishes of each participant. Participants felt that the research was a private (and perhaps therapeutic) experience, and they were protective of their anonymity, which perhaps influenced their decision not to be directly involved in wider dissemination of the study findings. One participant chose to invite their parent to this feedback session in which I shared

the initial research outcomes and themes. For them, this appeared to be a way of giving voice to their lived experience.

All participants described feeling their experiences were important and should be shared with schools so that other less resilient LGBTQ+ CYP could be better supported in the future. Building a sense of momentum to share the research outcomes with schools was difficult to establish, however, since participants had engaged in the research on an individual basis, using virtual methods, and the group had not met in person due to COVID-19 restrictions. Group cohesion felt unachievable at the time, which might have contributed to a momentum to disseminate findings more widely.

Participants did not describe a wish to be directly involved in sharing the research outcomes and felt pleased they had taken part but were happy to pass this responsibility to me. This time coincided with the reduction of COVID-19 restrictions and the return to a sense of normality, which may have altered their sense of priority.

In the future, I intend to approach participants to ask whether they would like to be involved in designing written materials aimed at teachers, which might be shared within schools in the local authority and neighbouring areas. I also plan to publish the study as a way of sharing the research findings within the EP profession.

I intend to share the study findings with schools and EPs within the local authority. In sharing the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents, I hope to give these young people a respected and valued voice and offer insight into how other LGBTQ+ CYP may feel. By exploring the similarities of the participants who took part in this research, I hope educational practitioners may find it valuable in considering the strategies for supporting LGBTQ+ identifying young people.

Reflective Box:

I was initially surprised that participants chose not to take part in sharing the research findings. I was concerned this may be due to uncertainty about the value of the study, or a sense of vulnerability. However, on reflection, it feels that in sharing their experiences, participants were entrusting their stories to me and had 'given' them over to me. They were, in essence, giving over the responsibility to share their experiences. All participants were unwavering in their commitment to the research, possibly driven by a desire to improve the lives of other LGBTQ+ young people. Many had spoken of the importance of challenging what they perceived to be a societal heteronormative and cisgender 'status quo', and perhaps felt I was the right person to do so.

Recommendations for Further Research

Robinson and Schmitz (2021) highlight a need for further research among underrepresented sexual and gender-diverse groups who challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity. They emphasise the need for this research to be strength-based and focused on how these young people develop their sense of resilience. While the current study contributes to this area, future research would be well positioned to explore the experiences of other marginalised groups who also identify as LGBTQ+.

Research with LGBTQ+ youth of colour would contribute to this area of study since the majority of research in this area has focused on the experiences of white adolescents (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). Although ethnic origin was not part of the selection process within the current study, all participants happened to be white British. The experience of youth with multiple marginalised identities would be a worthwhile subject of future research. Focusing on how ethnic minority status and cultural values can affect the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents would be a valuable contribution to knowledge in this area.

Final Reflections:

I have learned a great deal throughout my research journey, not least being how to carry out this form of research, which is of little surprise since I consider myself a novice IPA researcher. I have learned more than I anticipated about LGBTQ+ adolescents and myself, which may be illustrative of the assumptions I initially made. Being a member of the community I was seeking to research meant that I needed to address the preconceptions I held about the shared experience of being LGBTQ+. The extent to which the current generation of LGBTQ+ adolescents hold attitudes and views which are different to mine has surprised me and highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of gender and sexual identity which I had not previously considered. Simultaneously, hearing the painful and often traumatic experiences of isolation and confusion shared by participants was triggering for me at times and reminded me of my own sense of isolation while growing up.

The challenge has therefore been not to project my own experiences upon those of the participants and to separate my own experiences from those being shared. While achieving a sense of separation and emotional distance may have been difficult at times, I feel that being a member of the community I was researching ultimately enhanced the participant-researcher relationship, the development of rapport and encouraged participants to feel they could entrust me with their lived experiences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheet for Potential Participants

Research Project Title: How do adolescents identifying as LGBTQ+ experience their lives?



What is this study about?

Part 1: Summary

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project. I am happy to go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have when we meet.

The research is about the experiences of children and young people who identify as LGBTQ+. This means that they identify as gay, bisexual, trans or transgender, queer, questioning, intersexed, asexual and anything else in the community.

I am interested in finding out about your experiences. I want to explore what is important to you, what things might have been challenging and what things have helped you. This research will take place online because of the COVID restrictions at the moment.

If you are interested in this study, please read Part 2 below. It is entirely YOUR CHOICE whether or not to participate in the study.



What will happen to me in the study?

Part 2: Further Information about study

If you are interested in taking part, please give your parents/carers a Parent Information Sheet which explains what the research is about. This sheet invites them to sign up for an online meeting when I will talk to you and your parents about the project, and you can ask any questions you might have.

If you and your parents decide to go ahead with the research, I will share a consent form with you, which you will both need to complete and return to me.

Following this, we will meet so that I can get to know you a little before the research begins. I will help you to think about the topics or themes you might like to explore and I will check that you are comfortable using Google Jamboard. After this session you will have the chance to access your Jamboard in case you'd like to practise using it and you can start to jot down your ideas if you'd like.

I will then meet with you again and I will ask you to create a virtual collage using Google Jamboard. You can use images, words, etc. to tell me about your experiences. Before you leave this session, I will share with you some questions to reflect on your experience of creating the collage and your experiences.

We will then meet to talk about your school and your experiences, what might have been hard and what has helped you along the way. There are no right or wrong answers – it is your experience that I am interested in. These sessions will be audio recorded so that we can listen back to what was said.

When we meet the next time, I will share with you some thoughts I have had about your experiences. I will ask you if they describe your experiences properly and are true to what you feel. I will then ask you if you would like to be involved in further parts of the research to share your experience, and think about how we can use the information to share the ideas to more people.

You can have your parents/carers at any of these sessions if you think this would help you feel more comfortable and relaxed.



What are the possible benefits and risks?

- ★ Information gained from you and other young people may help to improve how school staff work with LGBTQ+ young people.
- ★ Talking about your experiences and having someone interested in your experiences and listening to you can make you feel good.

- No physical risk – you will not be hurt.
- Your private information will be stored securely.
- Your real name will not be used in the research and what you share will be anonymous.
- If I am worried about your safety because of something you have told me, I may need to tell a responsible adult so they can help you. I would discuss this with you before I did anything.
- You might think about things during the interview that cause you to become upset.
- To support you, there will be a familiar adult to provide follow-up support if necessary. You can also stop the interview at any point if you become upset and we can always rearrange the interview for another day if you would prefer.



When will the study begin and end?

You will be involved in the initial stages of the research process, which will take place in October and November 2021. The research project will last up to 10 months until it is fully written up which will be summer 2022.

Please feel free to ask me (Nick) or my supervising tutor (Sahaja) any questions using the contact details provided below. Please keep this information sheet in a safe place in case you want to read it again in the future.

Name of researcher: Nicholas Fletcher	Name of research supervisor: Dr. Sahaja Davies
Email: nfletcher3@sheffield.ac.uk	Email: t.s.davies@sheffield.ac.uk

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)).

Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

As I will be collecting some data that is defined in the legislation as more sensitive, information about gender identity and sexual identity, I also need to let you know that I am applying the following condition in law: that the use of your data is 'necessary for scientific or historical research purposes'.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research project is part of the requirements for completion of my Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology and does not have any sponsorship or funding.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. Data will be securely stored and archived within University systems for the period of two years after the completion of the project, after which it will be safely destroyed.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Education Department ethics review procedure. Should you decide to take part, you will keep this information sheet and be asked to sign a consent form.



What happens next?

If you are interested in taking part, please talk to your parents/carers about it and give them a Parent Information Sheet so that they can find out more.

Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Parents/Carers

Research Project Title: How do adolescents identifying as LGBTQ+ experience their lives?

My name is Nicholas Fletcher and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying for a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Sheffield. I am writing to inform you of a research project I am conducting with children and young people who identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, asexual, intersex and anything else within the community).

I am asking if you would consider giving permission for your child to participate in this project. Before you decide it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with your family/child. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the project's purpose?

This research study is about exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying adolescents. The main purpose of this project is to get an understanding of their experiences of support at home, online and at school, and to consider how schools and Educational Psychologists can help to support their needs.

Why have I been chosen?

Your child has been invited to take part in the study because they have been identified as meeting the following selection criteria:

- Aged 11-18
- Identifies as LGBTQ+
- In full time education

I am therefore interested in their views. Two or three other children will also be involved in this project.

Does your child have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you want your child to take part. If you do decide for your child to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Your child will also be given a consent form to sign if they wish to partake in the study. Both you and/or your child can withdraw from the study at any time. You do not have to give a reason if you choose to withdraw.

What will happen to my child if they take part?

If your child were to take part, they will be involved in the project, to take place in the autumn term 2021.

1. If your child is interested in taking part and you are willing for them to participate, then I will invite you and your child to attend an online meeting where we will discuss the nature of the research in greater depth. During the meeting, we will talk about you and your child giving consent to take part in the project. It will also be an opportunity for you to ask any questions about the research. When consent forms have been returned, we will make arrangements for the next phase of the research.

2. **Session 1** (lasting up to half an hour). To help your child feel comfortable with the research I will meet them online so that we can get to know each other a little better. I will also ask them to start to think about the topics or themes they might like to explore, and check that they are comfortable using Google Jamboard. After this session they will have the chance to access their Jamboard, in case they'd like to practise using it, or to jot down their ideas.

3. **Session 2** (lasting up to an hour). This part of the project will involve your child creating a virtual collage, using Google Jamboard during an online meeting with me. They will be prompted to use images and words, to create a collage that explores their experience of identifying as LGBTQ+ and the support they have experienced online, at home and at school.

4. **Session 3** (lasting up to an hour). During this session, I will ask your child to discuss their collages with me and to describe their experiences in greater depth. The sessions will be audio recorded.

5. Ongoing – during the project, your child may be asked to reflect on how they have found each part of the research process. What has doing the research meant for them? How did they find the process? What ideas, thoughts and experiences did they have whilst doing the research?

6. **Session 4** (lasting up to an hour). I will meet with your child to ask them to support an interpretation I have made of their experiences. This is known as 'member checking' and allows the child the opportunity to confirm or refute any ideas that I have.

7. Sharing the findings – your child will be offered the opportunity to participate in

sharing the findings of the research. The extent to which they take part in this will depend on their preference. Privacy will be respected throughout the process, protecting the anonymity of each participant.

What do they have to do?

It will not be necessary for your child to do anything specifically in preparation for participation in the research study. If your child chooses however, they could reflect on their experiences prior to the sessions taking place. The main thing required is that they come with an open mind and a willingness to explore their personal experiences in the hope that this information may go on to help others.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Although no physical risk will be posed, there is a potential risk that children may identify key events in their stories that cause an emotional response. As a support mechanism, there will be a key person identified linked to your child's current professional support system to provide follow-up support to children if necessary. The risk of distress is further minimised by my practice of consultation as part of my doctorate training and prior experience as a primary school teacher. Therefore, I have been trained to conduct interviews in a sensitive manner, with empathetic listening and responses to children's emotional needs.

In the event of your child appearing to become upset during a session, they will be reminded that they can pause/stop at any point. They will also be reminded of their right to choose not to answer certain questions or to fully withdraw from the research. If I feel that your child is experiencing significant distress, I will stop the session in a supportive manner. It is advised that children who are experiencing significant stress or emotional difficulties should not participate in the study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

One of the benefits of doing research of this kind is the opportunity for participants' voices to be heard. The information gained from this study may also have implications for improved educational practice for both educational provisions and professionals working with LGBTQ+ children and young people.

What if something goes wrong?

Complaints and concerns should initially be addressed to myself as the lead researcher nfletcher3@sheffield.ac.uk or the supervising tutor, Sahaja Davies via email: t.s.davies@sheffield.ac.uk. However, should participants feel that their complaint has not been handled to their satisfaction they can contact the Director of Ethics, Dr. Anna Weighall at the School of Education via email anna.weighall@sheffield.ac.uk.

Will my child's participation be kept confidential?

Ethical guidelines will be followed and all information that is collected from your child's involvement in the project will be kept confidential. Your child's name will not be used in the writing up of the final report. During the research tasks, participants may adopt a pseudonym, which they will be referred to. Family relationships or professional roles may be referred to (e.g. sister, teacher), however no person, third parties or schools will be named. Your child will be able to inform me at any point, if there is anything that they would like to be left out. If, for any reason, I become concerned about your child's or others' safety and/or well-being, there is an obligation to pass on this information to the designated person who is responsible for matters of this kind.

What is the legal basis for processing my child's personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis I am applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

As I will be collecting some data that is defined in the legislation as more sensitive, information about gender identity and sexual orientation, I also need to let you know that I am applying the following condition in law: that the use of your child's data is 'necessary for scientific or historical research purposes'.

How will the data my child produces be stored and used?

A copy of the virtual collage produced by your child will be downloaded at the end of the session on a secure online storage system approved by the University of Sheffield. Audio recordings of interviews will be encrypted and password protected, and will be deleted as soon as they have been transcribed. Transcribed interviews will be stored on a secure online storage system approved by the University. Upon completion of the project, additional copies of the data will be destroyed. Data will be securely stored and archived

within University systems for the period of two years after the completion of the project, after which it will be safely destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of the project will be drawn together to be included in a thesis and may be published in a journal. Your child and their school will not be identified in any reports of publications. You will be informed of the research summary, once the thesis is completed and approved, summarising key findings from the research project. You will be informed if the data is published in a journal and asked if you would like a copy of the report. General findings, which may improve educational practices, may be shared with educational professionals in local secondary schools. Children who participate in the research will receive a personalised debrief/summary at the end of the interviews.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research project is part of the requirements for completion of my Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology and does not have any sponsorship or funding.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Education Department ethics review procedure. Should you decide to take part, you will keep this information sheet and be asked to sign a consent form.

My contact information:

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

If you are interested in taking part in this research and would like to discuss the project in more detail please contact me at:

Email: nfletcher3@sheffield.ac.uk

The supervising tutor for this project is Dr. Sahaja Davies and his contact details are as follows, should you wish to contact him: t.s.davies@sheffield.ac.uk.

Appendix 3: Consent Forms

Title of Project: How do adolescents identifying as LGBTQ+ experience their lives?

Name of Researcher	Nicholas Fletcher
Participant identification number/pseudonym	

If you agree for your child to participate in this research, please read each statement below, indicate your response and sign below to give your consent.

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
✓		
Taking part in the project:		
I have read and understood the project information sheet or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree for my child to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include my child creating a collage of their experiences and discussing their experiences with the researcher.		
I understand that taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw my child from the study at any point, up to 7 days after completion. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want my child to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
How my information will be used during and after the project:		
I understand my child's personal details such as their name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	✓	
I understand and agree that my child's words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that they will not be named in these outputs.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my child's data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers:		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this		

project to The University of Sheffield.		
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Name of parent/carer:	Date:	Signature:
Name of lead researcher:	Date:	Signature:

(To be signed and dated in presence of the participant).

Copies: Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Title of Project: How do adolescents identifying as LGBTQ+ experience their lives?

Name of Researcher	Nicholas Fletcher
Participant identification number/pseudonym	

Please make sure you have read (or listened to) the Information Sheet before filling in this form.

Please read the statements below and tick if you agree with them.		✓
	I have read (or listened to) and understood the Information sheet for the above study.	
	I have had time to think about the information, ask questions and have had these answered.	
	I confirm that I am choosing to take part in this project and have not been pressured. I understand that taking part in this project will involve me making a collage and discussing my experiences. Interview sessions will be audio recorded.	

	I understand that I can withdraw from this project at any time, up to 7 days after the project has ended, without giving a reason. If I withdraw, my data will be destroyed.	
	I understand that I do not have to answer any questions during the session(s) that I do not want to or feel able to.	
	I understand that the things I talk about in this project will be written in a report. My name will not be used in the report. Extracts from the conversations may be used as quotes to illustrate certain points however no actual names will be used.	
	I agree for the data collected about me to be used in an anonymised report for publication within a peer-reviewed journal.	
	Yes, I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of participant:	Date:	Signature:
Name of lead researcher:	Date:	Signature:

Copies: Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 4: Letter Confirming Ethical Approval



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Downloaded: 28/02/2022

Approved: 28/09/2021

Nicholas Fletcher

Registration number: 190117654

School of Education

Programme: Educational and Child Psychology (DEdChPsy)

Dear Nicholas

PROJECT TITLE: How do adolescents identifying as LGBTQ+ experience their lives? A narrative study using the creative arts

APPLICATION: Reference Number 039338

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 28/09/2021 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 039338 (form submission date : 05/09/2021); (expected project end date: 01/07/2022).
- Participant information sheet 1092981 version 3 (05/09/2021).
- Participant information sheet 1092982 version 4 (05/09/2021).
- Participant consent form 1092983 version 1 (08/06/2021).

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

ED6ETH Edu
Ethics
Administra
tor School
of
Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy:
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure>
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.

The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix 5: Interview Schedule

- 1. Can you tell me about your experience of being 'out' / 'coming out'?**
*Possible prompts: home - family, friends - school.
How did you feel?
Tell me what you were thinking.
You said that you identify as LGBTQ+, can you tell me more about that?*
- 2. Can you tell me what it feels like to be an LGBTQ+ person at your school/college?**
Possible prompts: What happens, how do you feel, how do you cope?
- 3. How do you think these experiences have affected you?**
Possible prompts: at home, at school, online?
- 4. What are the main differences between a good day and a bad day?**
Possible prompts: Can you tell me a bit more about that? What do you mean by...?
- 5. How do you feel after a good day?**
Possible prompts: at school/college, at home, online experiences?
- 6. How do you think your life would be if you lived somewhere else?**
Possible prompts: school/college, friends.

Appendix 6: Initial Reflections

Lucas:

Lucas was enthusiastic during the collage-making session. At the time, I felt this was partly due to his confidence with IT and his ability to quickly find online images which matched the thoughts or the themes he was describing. This confidence meant that his use of collage had many of the characteristics of a 'real life' collage using magazine photographs since he was able to layer one image onto another, which created a much more interesting and dynamic collage. For him, the creative session seemed to have a therapeutic element. He talked about how the collages supported him to "*explain things a bit more*".

Lucas was fairly confident and talkative throughout the research process, and he was naturally very communicative. He was committed to the research from the very first session and had no concerns or questions about taking part. During the collage-making session, I was hesitant about talking since I did not wish to interrupt the thought process, however, I was guided by how much he wished to talk through his thoughts, which he freely shared with me.

The interview was informed by the collages Lucas had created, although I was conscious to maintain a reflexive approach so that new experiences and themes could be explored, should they arise. He seemed to be naturally reflective and was able to talk in detail about his lived experiences, covering a range of subjects, including difficulties and supportive elements of his experience.

I found myself surprised by my own lack of knowledge and perhaps misconception I may have held when Lucas described how his sexual identity and gender identity had evolved over time. This complexity surprised me at the time, and I was suddenly taken into the position of not knowing, which reminded me of the position of naïve inquiry which EPs often describe within the consultation process. Although I felt a sense of ignorance at the time, I maintained the position of unconditional acceptance, and Lucas chose to take the position of expert and teacher, which he seemed to enjoy. When the interview had concluded, I returned to the topic and asked Lucas if he had been in any way offended, and he reassured me that no offence had been taken. I had perhaps assumed that I would have some personal experience of the

subjects being explored by the participants. I am pleased that this interview was the first of the three, as this showed me that I should not make this assumption.

During this interview, I quickly realised that by looking exclusively at Lucas' collage I was unable to attune myself to his non-verbal cues such as body language or facial expression. The collage had become a distancing tool through which we were talking, which may have supported Lucas to talk more freely. However, as a researcher, it was important that I was able to respond to all cues available to me. As this was a video call, I was able to see Lucas' face, and this helped me to process unspoken information such as whether he was moving around in his chair, whether he was distracted by something or how attentively he appeared to be engaging with the collage. Similarly, I realised that Lucas would be unable to see my own non-verbal cues such as my expression or use of gesture if he was looking closely at his collage. In response, I began offering additional verbal feedback in order to encourage and support him to elaborate on his thoughts. As this was the first interview which took place, this realisation supported Charlotte's and Freddie's interview. I began to use non-judgemental informal phrases such as 'okay', 'Um-hum', as well as echoing what had been said as a way of demonstrating I was attuned to the conversation.

Charlotte:

I was struck by Charlotte's commitment to the study from our very first meeting when we discussed the consent process and the study in detail. She was certain that she wanted to take part, and had no questions about it. She had experienced a lack of support from her school, and the study seemed to be a way of supporting her to voice feelings that she hoped would bring about meaningful change for other LGBTQ+ CYP. This became a recurring theme as she compared what she would have found supportive in school with her experience.

It took some time for me to understand Charlotte's communication style, as she had a fairly serious tone of voice, and I was initially concerned that she was not enjoying the process. Because of this, I checked in on her well-being and encouraged her to reflect on her experience at the end of each session. Over time, I learned that this demeanour was reflective of how important she felt the

study was, and her drive to share her experience with the educational community. She seemed to have a strong sense of purpose. When I understood this, I became more comfortable, knowing that she was simply focused and engaged on the research.

The collage-making process seemed to be challenging for Charlotte and she did not naturally take to this approach of processing and exploring her experiences. In fact, the collage-making session felt like a barrier for her at times; she was ready to share her thoughts and had already given time to consider them. This was a fairly rigid approach to the activity which surprised me at the time, although I later realised this was Charlotte's preferred style. In response to this, during this collage session, I responded to Charlotte's use of metaphor and verbal description, by tentatively adding some images to the collage. Each time I did this, I asked permission to do so, and then checked if the image represented her ideas accurately. At other times I added some text to the collage, which was a direct quote of what she had said. Knowing that this session was not recorded, I was keen to avoid losing themes which she may wish to return to during the subsequent interview. Interacting with the collage-making in this way increased the researcher-participant connection, as I was able to demonstrate my active listening skills in a visible way, which then enhanced the sense of rapport and trust between us. I was uncertain if the collage supported Charlotte to develop new insights into her experiences, however. Although it was a challenge for Charlotte, I feel that this approach gently encouraged her to explore new areas which she may not have considered before, which I feel may have supported her to reach new insights. Without the collage, I feel that she would have largely focused on familiar themes and experiences.

Charlotte maintained her focused demeanour during the interview, which I felt represented her desire to contribute to meaningful change and her perception that this was an important study. She returned to the theme of 'community' throughout the conversation, referring to the LGBTQ+ community, which I also felt represented the high value she was giving the study. When I asked her how she had found the experience, she described feeling relaxed and that it had been easy to talk about each theme and experience. I felt this indicated the trust which had been established between us, further enhanced by being in her bedroom 'safe space'.

At times Charlotte's use of a second-person point of view felt like a barrier to exploring her own lived experience; she often spoke in general terms and used 'you' instead of the personal pronoun 'I'. I wondered if she was doing this to maintain her own emotional distance from the difficult and personal themes being explored. In response, and in a desire to encourage her to describe her own lived experience, I tried to ask sensitively phrased questions such as "How do you feel that has affected you?", to which she responded positively and this encouraged her to consider a more personal and meaningful answer. I also explicitly encouraged her to share her own lived experiences and reassured her that I was especially interested in hearing about those rather than her thoughts about the 'community' in general terms. This, in addition to increasing rapport between us over time, supported Charlotte to explore and share her experiences and themes in a meaningful way.

I encouraged Charlotte to share previously unexplored thoughts by asking her if there was 'anything else that is important' she might like to share, before moving on to a new topic. This was a question which I found useful within all the interviews, and it seemed to encourage new ideas which may have not been considered previously, as well as encouraging the participant to focus on what has been especially important to them.

I sensed that my own LGBTQ+ identity was important to Charlotte during the research. Although this was pure speculation on my part, I wondered if part of her motivation to engage with the study was to support a fellow member of the LGBTQ+ community. I found this dynamic touching at the time, and I feel this sense of connection enhanced the interview process in particular.

Freddie:

Freddie had a light-hearted and animated demeanour throughout our sessions, and was a lively and keen participant. She approached the collage-making activity in a different way from the other participants, which I found interesting at the time. She chose to separate her experiences into positive and negative, creating two distinct collages. Since I had shared the research aims with the participants, Freddie was aware that I was especially interested in the positive experiences and supportive factors of their experiences.

Freddie had only recently 'come out' to her mother, and the experience had been traumatic for her. The rawness of this experience meant that she felt it important to spend time during the collage-making session and interview describing what had happened, as a way of sharing her experience of trauma, which she seemed to find cathartic. Later, she described the study in therapeutic terms, saying that 'everyone should do it' and communicated how much she valued her experience.

As this was a recent experience and felt somewhat unresolved for Freddie, I made sure that she felt able to continue with the interview and not need a break or to resume the session at another time. However, she returned to her initial light-hearted tone, which I wondered may be a coping mechanism. I also connected on a personal level to this topic, and it was difficult to maintain the researcher-participant relationship at times. Talking about such an emotive and personal subject was emotionally challenging at times, and I was conscious not to communicate my own feelings but wanted to demonstrate empathy and echo the hurt and sense of disappointment Freddie had expressed. I also felt the need to offer reassurance and support, which I did when the interview had concluded when I offered her the opportunity to debrief without the added pressure of being recorded. We spoke for a while, and I felt reassured that she had a well-established support network around her which would help her to navigate this situation in the future.

Freddie's style of communication was particularly lively, dynamic and quite dramatic at times, and she was able to paint a vivid picture when describing her experiences. Her light-hearted tone perhaps belied the serious and difficult themes she often explored, and I felt it was important to allow the space for the fun and jovial tone, as well as the more difficult subject areas since I felt these two elements were necessary for Freddie to feel safe. In doing so, I was conscious of striking a balance between these two polar opposites. My verbal responses were therefore carefully considered, as I wished to avoid appearing flippant when she chose to return to a difficult experience or theme.

Appendix 7: Exploratory Comments and Emergent Themes

Extract 1: Charlotte

Descriptive comments: normal text. Linguistic comments: italic, Conceptual comments: underlined

Emergent Themes	Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments
<p>Sense of connection on social media.</p> <p>Exploration of LGBTQ+ identity through social media.</p> <p>Labels as unimportant to understanding own sexuality</p> <p>A process of self-questioning.</p>	<p>I: And what do you feel you get from connecting with the 'community'?</p> <p>R: I'm not quite sure really, because it was nice to see people that I liked that were in the community. Because it's, I looked and stuff, and there weren't many people that I like, enjoyed watching on TV shows or on YouTube and like singers and stuff. I weren't necessarily seeing anyone that I found interesting that was also a part of the community. So when I found like, my little bubble of people, it were important to me that I kinda stayed connected with that, while I've tried to figure out whether I was a part of that bubble as well, kinda.</p> <p>I: And where do you feel you are now, in that journey?</p> <p>R: Erm, I feel like I'm at the end of it, really. Erm, I kinda, I've figured myself out, and I've figured out the fact that I don't necessarily need a label kind of thing.</p> <p>I: That's interesting.</p> <p>R: Yeah, 'cos I were thinking to myself, like, it were only four month back or so, like 'could I be in a relationship with a man?' yes, 'can I be in a relationship with a woman?' yes, but it was also 'could I be in a relationship with anyone?'. To be fair, if I connected with someone and if they were good looking and</p>	<p>Connecting with peers online – similar age and gender identity and sexual orientation? <u>Social media profiles feel more accessible and lead to a feeling of personal connection?</u></p> <p>Sense of connection. <u>describing feeling safe, and part of the group? Indicating self- acceptance also?</u></p> <p>Important to maintain sense of connection, through the exploration of own identity? <u>Implicit support from access and sense of connection with other LGBTQ+ people online.</u></p> <p><i>'figured out' self, although hesitant .</i></p> <p>Feeling more comfortable now – rejecting the need for a label. <u>Empowerment through feeling connected with other LGBTQ people online? Necessarily/kind of thing –</u> hesitation about rejection of label.</p> <p>Recent reflection – explaining the previous hesitation about rejecting labels.</p> <p>Self-questioning – testing self, theoretical exploration of sexual identity.</p>

<p>Simplifying labels as a way of managing others.</p> <p>Sexuality as private.</p>	<p>stuff, I could be in a relationship with anyone that I wanted to. And so, that kinda took away my label of being bisexual, and it were more leaning towards the pansexual bit. It were...I've stuck with bisexual purely because of other people and their understanding. You can say to someone that you're bisexual and they get that you can be with a man or a woman. If you say pansexual you're immediately going to get all the kitchen hardware jokes and the "oh you love pans?", and it's not something that I want to discuss with people, in depth kind of thing.</p> <p>I: So does it feel like labels are more important to other people than to you?</p> <p>R: Yeah.</p>	<p><i>Emphasis of 'anyone' highlighting gender as unimportant to attraction.</i></p> <p>Connection more important than gender.</p> <p>Rejecting label of 'bisexual', more drawn towards 'pansexual'</p> <p><i>Hesitance – as moving towards more confident and profound stance.</i></p> <p><u>Choosing a label as a way of managing other people – a simplification for others?</u></p> <p>Public v private use of labels.</p> <p>Making a joke of other's ignorance about 'pansexual' label.</p> <p>Sexual orientation label as personal and private and not wishing to educate others about it.</p> <p><i>Personal subject, leading to brief reply.</i></p>
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Extract 2: Freddie

Emergent Themes	Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments
<p>Lack of bi-visibility as a damaging experience</p> <p>Oversimplification of LGBTQ+ representation and discourse.</p> <p>A lack of information and visibility as damaging.</p>	<p>R: Yes, but bi-erasure can be so many things, but that is one point of bi-erasure.</p> <p>I: What else can it be?</p> <p>R: There's...we're just under-represented, in so many situations. And it makes it very difficult, for people who feel the same way I do, to understand the way they feel. Even...not even, cos, not even in TV, just in TV shows and things like that. It's just the fact that, people will talk about, you know, being, you know, being gay. And they'll be like 'there are gay people, and there's lesbians and they like the same gender, and there's straight people and they like the opposite gender. And you're like 'cool!</p>	<p>Others' perceptions and misconceptions of bisexuality a barrier to her own self-acceptance. Took longer to accept herself because of this wider ignorance.</p> <p><u>Bi-erasure – feeling that sexuality isn't taken seriously or considered valid in its own right.</u></p> <p>Bisexual people underrepresented – a lack of visibility and role models in society.</p> <p>Lack of visibility on TV.</p>

<p>Looking for information online.</p> <p>Attraction to people of different genders as a confusing experience.</p> <p>Feeling alone and unsupported.</p> <p>Sense of confusion.</p>	<p>What am I?'. And just, I felt for a very long time nobody talked to me about it, I didn't see it on TV, I didn't see it, you know I didn't hear about it. It was like it didn't exist, and it took me a lot of work to find out that this is a label, and ... in fact the only reason I found out about it is 'cos a few years ago I Googled 'I like boys and girls' , and it said 'bisexual'. And that's the only way. I did the 'Am I Gay?' test, as most of us do, now. I did that, and it said 'yes'. And I went, okay, cool, I'm gay. But then I had this big crush on a boy, and I was like, okay, oh god, erm, great. So I Googled it. I had to Google, I think it was, the exact words I think were 'why do I like boys and girls?'. And that's how I figured it out! (laughs).</p> <p>I: I remember you said 'no one told me' a lot when we were making the collage, is that what you were describing?</p> <p>R: Yeah. 'Cos I was... I didn't think about it and it baffles me that I managed to go so many years...I managed to go for four years, thinking that I had managed to break the system and do both. I was like, I thought that was just me, I thought that I had just managed to do it. I thought it was just me...I thought I was ILL, I didn't know what happened! (laughs).</p>	<p>Narratives describing gay, lesbian and straight but not bisexual – avoidance of this, or 'erasure' of bisexuality.</p> <p>A need for bisexual people to be specifically represented and visible, not just 'gay' people.</p> <p>Searching for answers about herself online. <u>'Gay' used as an encompassing word for LGBT, as well as meaning same-sex attracted?</u></p> <p>Exploring sexual orientation through who she is attracted to, and how confusing this was. <i>Laughter as this now feels ridiculous</i></p> <p>Absence of guidance and information. A need to educate herself.</p> <p>Four years of being confused and isolated.</p> <p>Thought she was the first person to be attracted to both girls and boys but unaware of which label this was.</p> <p><i>Shouting ILL to highlight strength of feeling.</i></p>
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Extract 3: Lucas

Emergent Themes	Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments
<p>Complexity of interplay between gender identity and sexual orientation.</p>	<p>I: That sounds complicated.</p> <p>R: Yeah I do it for them to kind of understand. Because there's the whole debate of if you're trans and you're dating a female and haven't had any of the surgeries, it's kind of one of those</p>	<p>Aware of other's perceptions when dating. Added complexity of sexual orientation and navigating romantic relationships on top of gender identity and being trans.</p>

<p>Using pronouns as a basic and non-negotiable form of respect.</p> <p>Labels as audience dependent.</p>	<p>I: How do you feel about labels within that process?</p> <p>R: With labels, I feel very strongly that people should get my pronouns correct. With sexuality, I change it a bit. So with my close friends I'll have that complicated conversation with my close friends because it's quite funny to watch them try to figure it all out too. But with people in general, it's like, I'm gonna say I'm bisexual because there's the thing of, all that stuff, of gender and changing and stuff like that.</p>	<p>Importance of pronouns which relate to gender identity – 'feel strongly'.</p> <p>Flexible approach to sexuality-based labels.</p> <p>Playfulness/fluidity around some labels – sexual orientation. <u>Simplifying the message to others as a way of avoiding others discomfort or uncomfortable questions?</u> Internal perception of self is different to external message. <u>Helping to navigate relationships with others?</u></p>
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Appendix 8: Generating Super-Ordinate Themes

Table of super-ordinate themes and themes: Charlotte		
Themes	Page/line	Key words/phrases
<u><i>The process of self-acceptance</i></u> A process of self-acceptance. A process of self-exploration and reflection. A process of self-questioning. The process of understanding own gender identity. Having a gay friend as a step towards self-acceptance. Accessing peer support when questioning sexuality. The influence of gay history in understanding self.	1.8 4.14 7.14 8.20 2.12 5.2 16.28	<i>I had to start anew</i> <i>I'd think about something, I'd feel like I'd solved it</i> <i>'Can I be in a relationship with a woman?' Yes</i> <i>Trying to figure out what my gender was kinda a big one</i> <i>my feelings towards him as a friend...hadn't changed</i> <i>talking to friends and stuff</i> <i>it's 80's attitudes that have been passed down</i>
<u><i>Acceptance from others</i></u> 'coming out' to family as an anti-climax. 'coming out' in stages to family. Defining sexuality to family without 'coming out'. Feeling accepted more important than seeking the approval of others. Being asked for pronouns as code for being in a 'safe space'. The feelings of validation and acceptance which comes from LGBTQ+ inclusive practices. Feeling safe and valued when preferred pronouns are asked for. The normalisation of LGBTQ+ inclusive practices helping to overcome feelings of marginalisation. A perception of tolerance toward LGBTQ+ people, not equality. Feeling alienated and marginalised by tokenistic messages of equality.	12.3 12.4 12.23 13.2 18.11 19.23 19.20 20.16 17.12 17.15	<i>It were just like, the most casual thing ever</i> <i>been worried that won't be the same thing for...others</i> <i>I can say whether I find a woman good looking or not</i> <i>it would just like go o'er their heads and they wun't mind</i> <i>It's the little things that kinda mek everything an enjoyable experience.</i> <i>It's nice to see the pressure's been eased on, having to 'come out'</i> <i>So having it, kinda like ...slipped in, like a pronouns thing</i> <i>it's nice to know that I haven't got all three things to kind of worry about</i> <i>they just kinda do what's legally required of them</i> <i>That's it...now go back to maths, kinda thing.</i>

A fear of rejection from other LGBTQ+ peers. The support and freedom to be open about sexuality. A lack of judgement from family.	3.24 15.15 11.14	<i>that initial fear of you're not going to be accepted I have the realms to do it he had no problem with the fact that it were from the...lads section</i>
<u>Connection and Belonging</u> Connecting (online) with LGBTQ+ community through mutual interests. Online communities based on shared interests which are LGBTQ+ themed. Sense of connection on social media. Forming connections with LGBTQ+ people on social media through shared interests. Feeling connected to the LGBTQ+ community on social media. A feeling that local LGBTQ+ communities are relatively inaccessible. A feeling of being disconnected from LGBTQ+ communities in more urban areas. The value of feeling connected to a local LGBTQ+ space. A sense of belonging to an LGBTQ+ space. Belonging to the LGBTQ+ 'community' but unimportant where exactly.	5.18 5.19 6.29 6.3 6.19 18.8 18.2 18.18 18.23 14.26	<i>with Ru Paul's Drag Race and stuff.. there's a massive community there's places online where you can like speak to fans I found like, my little bubble of people I'd see someone that I really liked the content, kinda thing it were a vast, vast mix of people it's kind of the in-between that I'm stuck, that it's a bit...crap. the community thrives within cities, rather than everywhere I have visited, I have a lanyard, and I think a mug as well a sign in the winder' saying that we support...everyone in the community maybe I'm not just an ally, maybe I am like, in the community</i>
<u>Seeking Information</u> LGBTQ+ based entertainment as an educational experience. The need for a curriculum inclusive of LGBTQ+ history. A need for further discussion and exploration of gender and sexuality in school. Friends as a valued source of information. Friends as a non-judgemental source of information about gender identity.	3.11 16.18 16.19 15.25 16.2	<i>Ru Paul's Drag Race... introduced me to everything else they are very...you know teaching the bare minimum there's no support group, there's no like you know, after school clubs I had to 'come out' to them first, so they could be like 'okay so, this is this' they were all like, explaining</i>

<p><u>Overcoming Shame</u> Overcoming negative preconceptions and prejudice. Negative dominant narratives about LGBTQ+ people in the media. Overcoming attitudes based on prejudice through having gay role models. Forming a balanced view of being gay through an LGBTQ+ peer group. An awareness of the legacy of shame caused by societal prejudice to LGBTQ+ people.</p>	<p>1.14 2.3 2.11 3.13 16.28</p>	<p><i>but isn't that like a bit of a bad thing? it was almost always negative</i></p> <p><i>my feelings towards him as a friend ...hadn't changed</i></p> <p><i>they've ...educated me on it and I've taken a more positive light to it</i></p> <p><i>it's 80's attitudes that have been passed down</i></p>
<p><u>Visibility and Representation</u> Gay visibility as helpful in making sense of self. Diverse LGBTQ+ social media profiles as a positive form of visibility The positive Influence of celebrity role models. Overcoming negative perceptions through LGBTQ+ inclusive song lyrics and messages. The impact of celebrity role models. The impact of LGBTQ+ role models The long-term and profound impact of a gay role model. Diversity of representation on LGBTQ+ themed tv shows as helpful within self-exploration. Exploration of LGBTQ+ identity through social media. LGBT visibility on social media Impact of visibility</p>	<p>3.7 6.11 13.25 14.4 13.13 1.16 2.22 5.24 7.1 6.9 6.23</p>	<p><i>I started looking at, you know, popular culture within the LGBT scene</i></p> <p><i>it were like a big range of people, erm, which was very helpful.</i></p> <p><i>the most obvious one that...like, has affected me is [Lady] Gaga someone of such a mass value to popular culture, being so appreciated</i></p> <p><i>I realised that a big chunk of that, was in support of LGBT, he's very, you know, out and proud about it.</i></p> <p><i>I wouldn't have been so open and positively thinking about things the show itself it was a big representation of the whole community</i></p> <p><i>I kinda stayed connected with that, while I've tried to figure out I weren't just looking at just a load of straight cis-gendered people to help me get through sorting things out</i></p> <p><i>it was nice to see people that I liked that were in the community</i></p>
<p><u>Guidance and Support</u> Peer-based support as valuable. A need for support groups and informal support in school.</p>	<p>17.25 17.19</p>	<p><i>amongst students it would be a nice thing</i></p> <p><i>there's no like you know, after-school clubs there and things like that</i></p>

The value of guidance from friends when 'coming out' to family.	15.23	<i>it's only my friends, I kinda had to 'come out' to them first this is this, and this is this, and you know it's alright to feel like this'</i>
Strength and emotional resilience gained from support network.	15.8	<i>I've got a large support system</i>
The support and guidance from other LGBTQ+ people.	12.18	<i>a big part of my journey is looking at other people's journeys and talking to them about it</i>
The space to discuss LGBTQ+ topics within peer groups.	3.13	<i>I've found a friend group that they've kind of educated me on it</i>
<u>Labels as Problematic</u> Specific labels as unimportant.	3.4	<i>I were sort of coming to an age where a relationship isn't too far ahead</i>
Labels as unimportant to understanding own sexuality	7.7	<i>that I don't necessarily need a label kind of thing.</i>
A view that labels are unimportant.	8.8	<i>I'm just gonna say I dun't have one</i>
Labels as problematic.	7.5	<i>do I pick a label to present to different groups?</i>
Labels as restrictive and constraining.	10.8	<i>it's kinda hard to explain to someone without saying a label</i>
Finding a label which feels appropriate as validating.	5.14	<i>it kinda clicked into place for me, which were a relief</i>
An assertive choice to not define self with a label.	8.13	<i>that it's not my job to educate people, it's their job</i>
Simplifying labels as a way of managing others.	7.17	<i>I've stuck with bisexual purely because of other people</i>
Labels as private.	12.12	<i>I've kinda left it open for people kinda.</i>
Sexuality as private.	7.23	<i>it's not something that I want to discuss with people</i>
<u>Fluidity</u> A fluid and evolving use of labels.	5.1	<i>I labelled myself as an 'open mind straight person'</i>
The evolving use of labels reflecting a developing understanding of self.	14.24	<i>I was like 'maybe I'm not just an ally, maybe I am like, in the community'</i>
Fluidity of gender expression.	9.21	<i>I enjoy dressing in...anything, just any form of clothes</i>
A freedom to explore different labels.	4.12	<i>it were a journey of 'could I be in a relationship with a woman?'</i>
A freedom to explore gender expression.	10.20	<i>clothes are clothes. You wear what you want</i>
A freedom to explore gender identity.	9.4	<i>the way that people perceive me isn't that big of a deal to me</i>
A freedom to experiment and explore gender expression.	11.1	<i>she's like "fine, go ahead, buy what you want".</i>
The freedom to make own rules about gender expression.	9.15	<i>I just don't like care as much as like other cis-gendered women do</i>

<p>A fluid and dynamic exploration of gender identity. An open-mindedness about attraction and sexuality. Feeling free to explore sexuality through attraction. A freedom to explore sexuality without judgement or expectation. Fluidity and questioning gender identities accepted as valid by peers.</p>	<p>9.2 4.17 4.28 13.8 16.10</p>	<p><i>I...don't care if anyone perceives me as not being a woman everything's kind of fit into a place I were doing that [looking at people differently], to not just men I could bring a partner home and they'd be like "well, hi, nice to meet you". none of it was negative... they were very understanding</i></p>
<p><u><i>Gender as a Social Construct</i></u> A perception of gender as a spectrum. The mutual support of peers who are exploring gender identity. Gender expression not defining gender identity. A rejection of gender-based expectations. Challenging expectations of traditional gender expression. Clothes as a way of challenging societal expectations of gender. Gendered clothing as a social construct. Clothes as an important form of self-expression. Liberation through being non-conforming. How others perceive their gender as unimportant. Being misgendered as unimportant.</p>	<p>16.3 16.10 9.21 10.6 10.19 10.28 11.12 11.16 12.4 12.12 10.4</p>	<p><i>non-binary, and gender fluid and gender queer people, and kinda...indecisive...people I'd slip up and like...call...my friend who's non-binary, I'd call him... 'she' if I'm referred to as anything else, other than being a woman, I'm like 'okay, it's not affecting me I am a cis-gendered person, I just don't care a suit's a suit, a dress is a dress, clothes are clothes I'm going to the men's section, they have better shirts Cos a shirt's a shirt, and there's no point in putting any gender to it something that I've been... allowed to show and express being a goth and stuff I've kinda left it open for people kinda it's not my issue that I have to deal with why should it affect me?</i></p>

Table of super-ordinate themes and themes: Freddie

Themes	Page/line	Key words/phrases
<p><u>Exploring identity</u> LGBTQ+ identity as influential within wider identity. Freedom to explore identity without defining it.</p> <p>Feeling safe to explore LGBTQ+ identity with peers without needing to define it. Feeling safe to express herself and explore identity with peers. Music as an important form of self-expression and exploration. Expressing self through music.</p>	<p>5.10 5.5 5.7 5.19 16.18 16.12</p>	<p><i>I don't want that to be my whole identity</i> <i>I knew that they were, and there was this safe environment because of that</i> <i>you could feel safe, because, they can't be homophobic</i></p> <p><i>and you're like 'oh! This person's gay'</i> <i>music has been every...part of my life</i> <i>people who know me know that those sorts of people are so important to me.</i></p>
<p><u>Validation</u> Connections with other bisexual girls. Power of making connections with other LGBTQ+ people.</p> <p>Being open and truthful with others who understand. Sense of belonging and connection. Validation of whole self from LGBTQ+ support network.</p> <p>Implicit affinity with other LGBTQ people. Unspoken acceptance and understanding. Acceptance and validation from LGBTQ+ peers without risk.</p> <p>'Coming out' informally and indirectly to peers.</p> <p>Making connections through shared interests rather than directly 'coming out'. Connecting to LGBTQ+ artists through their music.</p>	<p>1.25 2.24 2.1 3.15 3.27 4.19 5.4 5.1 5.14 4.22 16.10</p>	<p><i>I'd found girls to talk to or be a part of and stuff like that it's so...it changes everything, 'cos you don't feel like you're alone</i> <i>I don't have to hide this from you because you understand it changes EVERYTHING, feel like you belong somewhere</i> <i>finding a community of people made me realise that these people aren't gonna just see me for that</i> <i>you find them in the...they 'come out' of nowhere</i> <i>I never came out and I never said it, but they just sort of knew it wasn't a thing where it was: 'okay you're gonna have to be in my life now'</i> <i>I didn't think I had to censor myself when I found a girl attractive</i> <i>we got talking, and we both sort of realised at the same time, like, 'oh! We're both gay!'</i> <i>because I love...I love these people, these are the biggest people</i></p>

Being open with LGBTQ+ peers as an affirming experience.	18.29	<i>It was one of the best experiences ... someone that you're...that really matters to you</i>
<u>Protection of self</u> Self-censorship and self-preservation. Self-preservation	5.16 6.8	<i>I'd obviously be cautious around certain people 'coming out' could be the worst thing that I could do, because you never know how it's gonna turn out</i>
A need to develop resilience and inner strength before 'coming out'.	6.14	<i>I was ten, I was...I didn't speak about it until I was about fourteen!</i>
Accepting the potential for rejection	19.2	<i>you've just got to brace yourself for the negative reaction</i>
Safety to be yourself with LGBTQ+ peers	2.9	<i>It's about having a 'safe space'</i>
Gaging attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people	17.4	<i>they can't be homophobic if you're openly supporting a gay man</i>
Risk of rejection from family and fear of consequences.	9.24	<i>when it's your family, if they have a bad reaction that can cost you everything</i>
Less risky when 'coming out' to friends.	9.22	<i>if it's a bad reaction, then they're not your friend and that's it</i>
<u>Shame and isolation</u> Feeling isolated	2.20	<i>argh! There's no one here that relates to me or understands anything</i>
Overcoming shame and secrecy	2.24	<i>you don't feel like you're carrying this big secret any more</i>
Overcoming anxiety and shame.	3.19	<i>my whole view on who I was, changed, as soon as I realised that I didn't have to be alone in it and I didn't have to keep it a secret</i>
Rejection of shame and a determination to be open with peers.	5.27	<i>I didn't want to censor MYSELF and have to think about it, I wanted to express my feelings about a girl</i>
Isolation and initial denial.	6.16	<i>I really thought that it would go away, and I could hide from it</i>
Secrecy resulting in unhappiness.	6.25	<i>hiding it felt really bad, so I didn't want to do that any more</i>
Fear of judgement	18.14	<i>why should I have to hide from it and be in fear?</i>
Sense of isolation and confusion.	14.11	<i>I thought it was just me...I thought I was ILL; I didn't know what happened!</i>
Looking for information online	13.27	<i>I Googled 'I like boys and girls', and it said 'bisexual'.</i>
<u>Strength and Empowerment</u> Strength and determination.	7.12	<i>definitely a lot of strength was needed</i>

Feeling empowered by progressive attitudes	17.19	<i>people are hopefully more educated now and if they're not, what they gonna do?</i>
Growing confidence and self-worth.	18.1	<i>none of these people can understand the experience that I've had</i>
Rejecting the need to seek approval from others by 'coming out'.	9.18	<i>just dropped it in conversation, talked about girls.</i>
Equality and feeling affected by the changing political climate.	12.7	<i>every political aspect of being gay will always affect me and the way I live</i>
Determination and resilience, prepared for rejection from others.	7.9	<i>anyone who doesn't accept you clearly isn't good enough in your life</i>
Increased acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in society.	10.14	<i>they're not even like dominant over us anymore</i>
Strength gained from celebrities who are out.	16.1	<i>if he can do that, in the early 80's, I can do that now.</i>
Resilience when faced with the possibility of rejection	10.1	<i>if these people have a bad reaction, then I don't want them in my life anyway</i>
<u>Acceptance</u>		
Mutual acceptance with other LGBTQ+ peers	5.5	<i>they just sort of knew, and I knew that they were</i>
Self-acceptance as a process	6.5	<i>when I was starting to feel these feelings, I cared a lot, that it was me</i>
Self-acceptance as honesty	7.14	<i>you can't just pretend it's not there, because it always will be, and it always has been</i>
Self-acceptance as the route to happiness	18.6	<i>if you can't change it, you've got to embrace that part of you.</i>
Importance of acceptance from family.	10.4	<i>I would NEVER want my mum to think of me in any different way than before</i>
<u>Representation and visibility</u>		
Representation and LGBTQ+ visibility in the media.	6.26	<i>things that I was watching also showed more gay things ...I was like maybe this isn't that bad</i>
Gay role models in school living authentically.	7.2	<i>there'd been a lot of gay people that I knew of, and were just living their life</i>
The significance of celebrity bisexual visibility.	15.11	<i>Oh my god! Oh my god! This is revolutionary, he is bisexual</i>
Assertive and unapologetic visibility as a validating experience.	15.24	<i>he was so, like, matter of fact. The way he said it, he was...it was like he was getting back at people</i>
The significance of 'out' musicians she admires.	16.11	<i>I love...I love these people, these are the biggest people</i>

LGBTQ+ musicians as role models for living openly and proudly.	16.28	<i>it changed the way I saw it, because they were people I really loved and admired.</i>
<u>Erasure</u> Validity of bisexuality questioned by others. Wider ignorance about bisexuality as a barrier to self-acceptance. Oversimplification of LGBTQ+ discourse. A lack of information as damaging. A desire for more bisexual role models.	1.12 13.2 13.20 13.25 14.27	<i>a really sexual thing, and to the point where it's almost, like, dirty people er, tell me to pick or choose, or that I can't be both, or that I will choose one day there are gay people, and there's lesbians and they like the same gender, and there's straight people and they like the opposite gender It was like it didn't exist, and it took me a lot of work to find out that this is a label I would've liked someone to have said "I'm bisexual". I feel, just that, would've made up for SO MUCH</i>
<u>Challenging attitudes</u> A resentment towards heteronormativity. Reclaiming bisexuality as valid Overcoming perceptions of bisexuality The importance of achieving equality not just tolerance. Resentment of 'straight' privilege. Ignorance perceived as homophobia Small acts of hostility as unreasonable	14.15 1.22 1.18 12.14 12.12 12.16 12.20	<i>Straight people are in every single TV show, every single movie it was such a nice and pure thing, and it was completely non-sexual this is wrong and this is just a sexual thing people say that we're... equal now, because we're not getting killed straight people specifically, think that we're fighting for nothing I feel like people are being purposely ignorant I don't see how you can... still be homophobic and have these microaggressions</i>
<u>'Coming out' as problematic</u> A resentment of the need to 'come out' Trauma resulting from negative 'coming out' experiences	10.10 7.22	<i>straight people don't sit us down and tell us they're straight because I've had that traumatic experience, 'coming out' is not easy</i>

Consent and agency	8.20	<i>my trust got betrayed, I wasn't ready, I didn't consent to being outed</i>
Anti-climax of 'coming out' to family.	8.11	<i>there was this expectation because my mum didn't care, that I should have been happy</i>
An uncertainty post-'coming out'	9.1	<i>I just don't talk about girls and I'm so quiet about it</i>
Coming out 'passively' to family without disclosing verbally.	9.12	<i>get a girlfriend and then just bring her home</i>
Easy to 'come out' to friends.	7.29	<i>it was so easy to 'come out' to my friends</i>
'Coming out' as a significant life event	7.24	<i>probably the most important thing that's ever happened in my life</i>
<u>Labels as problematic</u>		
Ambivalence towards labels	10.27	<i>I can see the good and bad in labels</i>
Internal label as helpful in understanding identity.	10.28	<i>if we're talking about the bisexual label...I like the bisexual label</i>
Labels as binary	11.2	<i>I didn't see any in between</i>
Labels encouraging a fixed understanding of sexuality.	11.5	<i>if someone had told me, you don't have to pick, I would've just known</i>
Shared labels as a way of connecting with others.	11.10	<i>this person knows exactly how I feel, and that's cool</i>

Table of super-ordinate themes and themes: Lucas

Themes	Page/line	Key words/phrases
<p><u><i>The power of acceptance</i></u> Friends as intuitive and accepting of gender identity. Unconditional acceptance when 'coming out' to friends. A simplicity of connection with other LGBTQ+ peers.</p> <p>The simplicity of making new friends post transition. Genuine acceptance different to tokenistic gestures. Actions of others representing acceptance.</p> <p>Relief when 'coming out' is simple and acceptance is immediate. Acceptance from significant people contributing to resilience. Acceptance from other people within LGBTQ+ community. The joy and profound validation experienced by 'passing'. Pronouns as a measure of acceptance in school. A painful journey towards acceptance.</p>	<p>1.11 7.12 21.24</p> <p>19.3 3.11 8.16</p> <p>8.25</p> <p>13.21</p> <p>14.13 18.23 4.9 8.10</p>	<p><i>I'd never directly said it, they picked up on those subtle hints they were just like 'fair enough, go for it'</i></p> <p><i>Gen-Z...do a bit of a hand flip, and then they both assume they are gay</i></p> <p><i>they only know me as male and only know me as Lucas</i></p> <p><i>they just see me as an actual guy, that gives a lot of euphoria</i></p> <p><i>my brother will deadname me, and my mum will.... go "NO, it's your brother".</i></p> <p><i>I didn't think out of anyone...that my dad was gonna be that accepting</i></p> <p><i>I knew I wanted to 'come out' to a lot of other people...about being trans</i></p> <p><i>guys who are either gay or bisexual tend to be a lot more accepting</i></p> <p><i>he'll come in the kitchen and go "aye up boy" or "aye up lad"</i></p> <p><i>teachers are really, really good with pronouns and names</i></p> <p><i>"you'll always be my little girl, you'll always be my daughter".</i></p>
<p><u><i>Support as validating</i></u> Practical support from friends representing acceptance. Nurturing teachers as supportive. Practical and emotional support from partners. Accessing practical advice online about 'coming out'. Strength from feeling the support of others. Practical support as validating. Immediate validation and support available online.</p> <p>Support and acceptance from peers as validating. Support from other LGBTQ+ peers as valuable.</p>	<p>1.16 5.25 13.13 14.23</p> <p>20.5 20.6</p> <p>14.4 20.17</p>	<p><i>gave me some of his old clothes so that I had some male clothing</i></p> <p><i>I knew they were gonna be the understanding ones</i></p> <p><i>she sat there three hours with me, helping me pick out a name</i></p> <p><i>a lot of Instagram accounts nowadays that help you actually 'come out'</i></p> <p><i>have the love and support of everyone</i></p> <p><i>little things like my dad buying me binders ... has made me a lot more mentally stable and a lot mentally happier</i></p> <p><i>over time, he became one of the most supportive ones,</i></p> <p><i>knowing you have someone by your side...that makes it a lot easier</i></p>

A safe place to explore gender identity and sexual orientation.	6.16	<i>asking for the support of people, asking for their opinion on things, understanding myself</i>
The support of others through the process of understanding self.	21.1	<i>it's never nice to try and figure it out on your own</i>
Mutual support of peers.	20.15	<i>in gay clubs when I was known as the 'elder gay'</i>
<u>Living authentically</u> A desire to be open and live authentically.	5.1	<i>I started becoming myself around school, because I'd known for years</i>
Transition as becoming 'true self'.	12.20	<i>I was getting a step closer to being myself.</i>
Strength from living authentically.	19.18	<i>I am less scared of people...I can be myself and be very confident now I'm myself and I feel like I am myself</i>
Feeling connected with self through living authentically.	20.4	<i>you've got to be yourself, and you've got to understand yourself</i>
The importance of understanding yourself and living authentically.	20.16	
The need to find strength to 'come out'.	21.11	<i>It's hard when you know who you are but you can't be who you are</i>
<u>Making sense of self</u> Identifying as trans before aware what that label was.	6.24	<i>I didn't know what it was at that age, but I knew I wanted to be a boy</i>
A process of making sense of self.	7.2	<i>it was this whole new world except I was learning all these things</i>
Evolving choice of labels as understanding of self changes.	7.1	<i>I thought...that I was...bi at the time</i>
Evolving understanding of gender identity.	13.10	<i>I realised that I didn't want her to see me as female anymore</i>
Developing self-awareness and inner strength.	15.10	<i>I am quite strong with who I am and what I want to be.</i>
Self-improvement and resilience.	15.12	<i>If I looked at myself three years ago, I wouldn't recognise myself</i>
Pleasing self, not others.	15.15	<i>I've made the person I wanna be, not the person everyone else wants me to be.</i>
Exploring sexuality through labels.	16.3	<i>now I'm out as trans it's like mmm mmm, am I bi, am I straight?</i>
Accepting self as a traumatic and difficult journey.	21.19	<i>I feel like the worst part was coming to terms with myself</i>
Self-acceptance as a period of introspection.	21.10	<i>It's those late-night thinks, staring at your ceiling</i>
<u>Overcoming trauma</u> The trauma of not understanding self.	19.24	<i>I didn't know who I was and I couldn't be myself</i>
Overcoming trauma and shame through self-discovery.	15.6	<i>when I was at school was probably my hardest time and I came out and I was discovering myself.</i>
Overcoming trauma as a strengthening experience.	19.17	<i>it's given me a hell of a hard time, but it's given me more confidence</i>

Feeling alone and isolated.	15.23	<i>understanding these feelings that I felt, that no-one else seemed to have felt</i>
Stress after 'coming out'.	20.31	<i>there's a lot more pressure and there's a lot more...like stress that comes with it</i>
Desire to retreat and protect self.	2.16	<i>you just want to kind of curl up and hide yourself from everyone</i>
Experiencing prejudice and stigma while dating.	16.23	<i>straight girls don't want to date a trans person</i>
The trauma experienced by others lack of acceptance and prejudice.	20.27	<i>I don't think others understand how hard and complicated it can be sometimes.</i>
Damage caused by others ignorance.	21.6	<i>If people don't accept you ...that can cause a lot of stress and emotional damage</i>
<u>Rejection and risk</u>		
Assessing risk of rejection and judgement when 'coming out'.	5.15	<i>you get a sense of who's going to be quite understanding and who's going to be quite judgemental</i>
Mixed messages and judgement when 'coming out' to parents.	7.15	<i>even though she said the words she accepted me...I didn't feel like I was accepted fully</i>
Protecting vulnerable self by maintaining secrecy.	7.22	<i>mum was the first person to know my sexuality, she was probably one of the last people to know about my gender</i>
Period of introspection and seeking internal strength before 'coming out'.	7.28	<i>like I was trying to like push at this big boulder up a hill</i>
Fear of judgement and rejection.	8.1	<i>I was terrified to tell anyone, in case they didn't want me to be that way</i>
Choosing a trusted person to 'come out' to.	5.7	<i>I had a lot of respect and trust for her</i>
Identifying as transgender as a barrier to romantic relationships.	17.10	<i>it's a lot harder to find a significant other...that is willing to understand and learn</i>
<u>'Coming out' as a complex process</u>		
A need to 'come out' more than once (sexuality and then gender).	7.24	<i>there's a big difference between 'coming out' with my sexuality and 'coming out' with my gender</i>
'Coming out' as a repeated act.	11.2	<i>you have to keep 'coming out' to everyone your entire life</i>
'Coming out' to family as a complex and long-term process.	8.12	<i>hurt me, but nowadays, she's really really good</i>
Mixed feelings about having to 'come out'.	11.6	<i>until I get top surgery, and I can fully pass as male, I have to 'come out'</i>
<u>Supporting others</u>		

Empathy towards family members as they adjust to the transition. Supporting family as they process the change. A flexibility and forgiveness towards others.	9.14 9.20 3.16	<i>it's not just a transition for me, it's a transition for them too</i> <i>If they ever have questions, they can come to me and ask when you're more understanding and chill about your pronouns, people tend to respect them</i>
Family processing their gender transition in different ways.	9.9	<i>he completely avoids my deadname. And 'cos my mum still deadnames me sometimes</i>
Ongoing conversations.	9.27	<i>he will come and ask me "Is this correct? Is this the right thing? Can you expand that?" And I'm like, ABSOLUTELY</i>
Giving others time and space to research. Patience needed as family process and accept transition.	9.27 11.14	<i>He educates himself on the things he doesn't know as well it's taken that time, that learning and that energy over the past few years</i>
Supporting others in their journey of acceptance.	19.10	<i>they used to see me as a girl...all of a sudden they saw me as this guy</i>
Acceptance as a process of education in others.	21.20	<i>the worst part was...having those old people learn over time. now, they'll go "she, oh sorry, I mean he"</i>
<u>Accessing resources as problematic</u> A need for parental support to access resources. Reliance on others to access resources.	10.10 12.22	<i>you have to have your parents' consent and for them to ring up there's some things that I can't control, such as getting testosterone and getting top surgery</i>
Accessing resources takes time. Challenging authority of adults and power imbalances.	11.24 4.18	<i>about a two-year waiting list for the gender clinic, to even be seen the teachers I used to have...would dead name me round school</i>
<u>Labels as problematic</u> Disparity between identity and chosen label.	16.5	<i>I see myself as more of a straight male, but because of being trans I find it a bit complicated</i>
Managing others through use of labels. Labels as audience dependent.	16.7 17.16	<i>if people ask about my sexuality, I'll be like, "oh yeah I'm bi" with my close friends I'll have that complicated conversation</i>
'Gay' as an umbrella term meaning LGBTQ+. Distressing and confrontational experience when incorrect pronouns used.	22.1 2.11	<i>go up to someone and are like "are you gay?" with a hand gesture it does make me feel very, dysphoric and very bad about myself</i>
Complexity of interplay between gender identity and sexual orientation.	16.15	<i>if you're trans and you're dating a female and haven't had any of the surgeries, it's kind of one of those things of what really is it?</i>

Using chosen pronouns as a basic and non-negotiable form of respect.	17.14	<i>I feel very strongly that people should get my pronouns correct</i>
Being misgendered as a hostile act.	20.24	<i>there's always the thing of, because you're trans, people who misgender you</i>

Appendix 9 : Principal Table of Themes for the Group

Principal table of themes for the group

A: Focus on acceptance

'Coming out' as simple

Charlotte: It were just like, the most casual thing ever (page 12- line 3)

Lucas: I didn't think out of anyone...that my dad was gonna be that accepting (8-25)

Freddie: I never came out and I never said it, but they just sort of knew (5-4)

Charlotte: it would just like go o'er their heads and they won't mind (13-2)

Lucas: Gen-Z...do a bit of a hand flip, and then they both assume they are gay (21-24)

Lucas: I'd never directly said it, they picked up on those subtle hints (1-11)

Freddie: It was one of the best experiences ... someone that you're...that really matters to you (18-29)

Freddie: it was so easy to 'come out' to my friends (7-29)

'Coming out' as complex

Lucas: you have to keep 'coming out' to everyone your entire life (11-2)

Lucas: until I get top surgery, and I can fully pass as male, I have to 'come out' (11-6)

Lucas: there's a big difference between 'coming out' with my sexuality and 'coming out' with my gender (7-24)

Freddie: my trust got betrayed, I wasn't ready, I didn't consent to being outed (7-22)

Freddie: there was this expectation because my mum didn't care, that I should have been happy (8-11)

Lucas: there's a lot more pressure and there's a lot more...like stress that comes with it (20-31)

Lucas: the worst part was...having those old people learn over time (21-20)

Self-acceptance as a process

Freddie: when I was starting to feel these feelings, I cared a lot that it was me (6-5)

Charlotte: I had to start anew (1-8)

Charlotte: I'd think about something, I'd feel like I'd solved it (4-14)

Charlotte: they've ...educated me on it and I've taken a more positive light to it (3-13)

Lucas: it was this whole new world except I was learning all these things (7-2)

Lucas: It's those late-night thinks, staring at your ceiling (21-10)

Lucas: like I was trying to like push at this big boulder up a hill (7-28)
Lucas: I feel like the worst part was coming to terms with myself (21-19)

Validation through inclusive experiences

Charlotte: It's nice to see the pressure's been eased on, having to 'come out' (19-23)
Charlotte: It's the little things that kinda make everything an enjoyable experience (7-12)
Charlotte: So having it, kinda like ...slipped in, like a pronouns thing (19-20)
Lucas: teachers are really, really good with pronouns and names (4-9)
Charlotte: it's nice to know that I haven't got all three things to kind of worry about (20-16)

A desire for acceptance not tolerance

Lucas: they just see me as an actual guy, that gives a lot of euphoria (3-11)
Lucas: my brother will deadname me, and my mum will.... go "NO, it's your brother" (8-16)
Lucas: they were just like 'fair enough, go for it' (7-12)
Charlotte: he had no problem with the fact that it were from the...lads section (11-14)
Charlotte: they just kinda do what's legally required of them (17-12)
Freddie: I would NEVER want my mum to think of me in any different way than before (10-4)
Freddie: it wasn't a thing where it was: 'okay you're gonna have to be in my life now' (5-1)

Rejection and judgement

Lucas: If people don't accept you ...that can cause a lot of stress and emotional damage (21-6)
Lucas: you get a sense of who's going to be quite understanding and who's going to be quite judgemental (5-15)
Charlotte: that initial fear of you're not going to be accepted (3-24)
Freddie: when it's your family, if they have a bad reaction that can cost you everything (9-24)
Freddie: if these people have a bad reaction, then I don't want them in my life anyway (10-1)

Protection of self

Lucas: you just want to kind of curl up and hide yourself from everyone (2-16)
Lucas: even though she said the words she accepted me...I didn't feel like I was accepted fully (7-15)
Lucas: I was terrified to tell anyone, in case they didn't want me to be that way
Freddie: I'd obviously be cautious around certain people (5-16)
Freddie: 'coming out' could be the worst thing that I could do, because you never know how it's gonna turn out (6-8)

Freddie: you've just got to brace yourself for the negative reaction (19-2)
Freddie: I was ten, I was...I didn't speak about it until I was about fourteen! (6-14)
Charlotte: it's not my issue that I have to deal with (9-8)

B: Focus on identity

Labels as problematic

Freddie: if someone had told me, you don't have to pick, I would've just known (11-5)
Lucas: I see myself as more of a straight male, but because of being trans I find it a bit complicated (16-5)
Lucas: if you're trans and you're dating a female and haven't had any of the surgeries, it's kind of one of those things of what really is it? (16-15)
Freddie: I can see the good and bad in labels (10-27)
Freddie: I didn't see any in between (11-2)
Charlotte: do I pick a label to present to different groups? (7-5)
Charlotte: it's kinda hard to explain to someone without saying a label (10-8)
Charlotte: I don't necessarily need a label (7-7)

Understanding self

Freddie: if you can't change it, you've got to embrace that part of you (18-6)
Freddie: I don't want that to be my whole identity (5-10)
Freddie: you can't just pretend it's not there, because it always will be, and it always has been (7-14)
Charlotte: it were a journey of 'could I be in a relationship with a woman?' (4-12)
Charlotte: everything's kind of fit into a place (4-17)
Charlotte: I were doing that [looking at people differently], to not just men (4-28)
Lucas: I didn't know what it was at that age, but I knew I wanted to be a boy (6-24)
Lucas: I realised that I didn't want her to see me as female anymore (13-10)
Lucas: I thought...that I was...bi at the time (7-1)

Flexibility and fluidity

Charlotte: I labelled myself as an open mind straight person (5-1)
Lucas: now I'm out as trans it's like mmm mmm, am I bi, am I straight? (16-3)

Lucas: if people ask about my sexuality, I'll be like, "oh yeah I'm bi" (16-7)

Charlotte: I enjoy dressing in...anything, just any form of clothes (19-21)

Charlotte: clothes are clothes. You wear what you want (10-20)

Charlotte: non-binary, and gender fluid and gender queer people, and kinda...indecisive...people (16-3)

Freedom to explore

Freddie: I knew that they were, and there was this safe environment because of that (5-5)

Freddie: you could feel safe, because, they can't be homophobic (5-7)

Charlotte: I was like maybe I'm not just an ally, maybe I am like, in the community (14-24)

Charlotte: I just don't like care as much as like other cis-gendered women do (9-15)

Charlotte: I...don't care if anyone perceives me as not being a woman (9-2)

Charlotte: I could bring a partner home and they'd be like "well, hi, nice to meet you" (13-8)

Representation and Visibility

Freddie: Straight people are in every single TV show, every single movie (14-15)

Freddie: there'd been a lot of gay people that I knew of, and were just living their life (7-2)

Freddie: things that I was watching also showed more gay things ...I was like maybe this isn't that bad (6-26)

Charlotte: it was almost always negative (2-3)

Charlotte: Ru Paul's Drag Race... introduced me to everything else (3-11)

Charlotte: the show itself it was a big representation of the whole community (5-24)

Charlotte: I started looking at, you know, popular culture within the LGBT scene (3-7)

Charlotte: the most obvious one that...like, has affected me is [Lady] Gaga (13-25)

Charlotte: he's very, you know, out and proud about it (1-16)

Impact of role models

Freddie: I love...I love these people, these are the biggest people (16-11)

Freddie: he was so, like, matter of fact. The way he said it, he was...it was like he was getting back at people (15-24)

Freddie: if he can do that, in the early 80's, I can do that now (16-1)

Freddie: Oh my god! Oh my god! This is revolutionary, he is bisexual (15-11)

Charlotte: it were like a big range of people, erm, which was very helpful (6-11)

Charlotte: someone of such a mass value to popular culture, being so appreciated (14-4)

Charlotte: I weren't just looking at just a load of straight cis-gendered people to help me get through sorting things out (6-9)

Charlotte: it was nice to see people that I liked that were in the community (6-23)
Charlotte: my feelings towards him as a friend...hadn't changed (2-12)
Charlotte: I wouldn't have been so open and positively thinking about things (2-22)

C: Focus on stigma

Overcoming shame and trauma

Freddie: hiding it felt really bad, so I didn't want to do that anymore (6-25)
Charlotte: I've taken a more positive light to it (3-13)
Freddie: none of these people can understand the experience that I've had (18-1)
Lucas: when I was at school was probably my hardest time and I came out and I was discovering myself (15-6)
Charlotte: but isn't that like a bit of a bad thing? (1-14)
Freddie: you don't feel like you're carrying this big secret any more (2-24)
Freddie: argh! There's no one here that relates to me or understands anything (2-20)
Freddie: why should I have to hide from it and be in fear? (18-14)

Experience of isolation and confusion

Lucas: I didn't know who I was and I couldn't be myself (19-24)
Lucas: understanding these feelings that I felt, that no-one else seemed to have felt (15-23)
Lucas: I don't think others understand how hard and complicated it can be sometimes (20-27)
Freddie: I really thought that it would go away, and I could hide from it (6-16)
Freddie: I thought it was just me...I thought I was ILL, I didn't know what happened!
Charlotte: it's kind of the in-between that I'm stuck, that it's a bit...crap (18-8)
Lucas: it's never nice to try and figure it out on your own (21-1)
Freddie: my whole view on who I was, changed, as soon as I realised that I didn't have to be alone in it and I didn't have to keep it a secret (3-19)

Challenging cis-gender and hetero normativity

Freddie: straight people don't sit us down and tell us they're straight (10-10)
Freddie: people are hopefully more educated now and if they're not, what they gonna do? (17-19)
Freddie: every political aspect of being gay will always affect me and the way I live (12-7)
Freddie: they're not even like dominant over us anymore (10-14)

Charlotte: I'm going to the men's section, they have better shirts (10-28)

Charlotte: a suit's a suit, a dress is a dress, clothes are clothes (10-19)

Empowerment and resilience

Lucas: it's given me a hell of a hard time, but it's given me more confidence (19-17)

Lucas: I've made the person I wanna be, not the person everyone else wants me to be (15-15)

Charlotte: it's not my job to educate people, it's their job (8-13)

Freddie: I didn't want to censor MYSELF and have to think about it, I wanted to express my feelings about a girl (5-27)

Freddie: definitely a lot of strength was needed (7-12)

Freddie: just dropped it in conversation, talked about girls (9-18)

Freddie: anyone who doesn't accept you clearly isn't good enough in your life (7-9)

Charlotte: I...don't care if anyone perceives me as not being a woman (9-2)

Charlotte: it's not something that I want to discuss with people (7-23)

Lucas: I am less scared of people...I can be myself and be very confident (19-18)

Lucas: I feel very strongly that people should get my pronouns correct (17-14)

Erasure and prejudice

Freddie: people er, tell me to pick or choose, or that I can't be both, or that I will choose one day (13-2)

Freddie: there are gay people, and there's lesbians and they like the same gender, and there's straight people and they like the opposite gender (13-20)

Freddie: It was like it didn't exist, and it took me a lot of work to find out that this is a label (13-25)

Freddie: I would've liked someone to have said "I'm bisexual". I feel, just that, would've made up for SO MUCH (14-27)

Lucas: the teachers I used to have...would dead name me round school (4-18)

Charlotte: It's 80's attitudes that have been passed down (16-28)

Lucas: straight girls don't want to date a trans person (16-23)

Freddie: I don't see how you can... still be homophobic and have these microaggressions (12-20)

Lucas: there's always the thing of, because you're trans, people who misgender you (20-24)

D: Focus on support

Peer-based support

Charlotte: I've found a friend group that they've kind of educated me (3-13)

Charlotte: it's only my friends, I kinda had to 'come out' to them first (15-23)
Charlotte: 'this is this, and this is this, and you know it's alright to feel like this' (15-24)
Lucas: knowing you have someone by your side...that makes it a lot easier (20-17)
Lucas: asking for the support of people, asking for their opinion on things (6-16)
Freddie: they just sort of knew, and I knew that they were (5-5)
Freddie: It's about having a 'safe space' (2-9)
Freddie: I don't have to hide this from you because you understand (2-1)

Connection and belongingness

Charlotte: it were a vast, vast mix of people (6-19)
Freddie: finding a community of people made me realise that these people aren't gonna just see me for that (3-27)
Freddie: it changes EVERYTHING, feel like you belong somewhere (3-15)
Freddie: it's so...it changes everything, 'cos you don't feel like you're alone (2-24)
Charlotte: I have visited, I have a lanyard, and I think a mug as well (18-18)
Charlotte: a sign in the winder' saying that we support...everyone in the community (18-23)
Charlotte: with Ru Paul's Drag Race and stuff.. there's a massive community (5-18)
Freddie: I'd found girls to talk to or be a part of and stuff like that (1-25)
Charlotte: I found like, my little bubble of people (6-29)
Charlotte: I'd see someone that I really liked the content, kinda thing (6-3)
Charlotte: there's places online where you can like speak to fans (5-19)
Freddie: It was one of the best experiences ... someone that you're...that really matters to you (18-29)
Lucas: in gay clubs when I was known as the 'elder gay' (20-15)
Charlotte: I kinda stayed connected with that, while I've tried to figure out (7-1)

Practical support

Lucas: little things like my dad buying me binders ... has made me a lot more mentally stable and a lot mentally happier (20-6)
Lucas: gave me some of his old clothes so that I had some male clothing (1-16)
Lucas: she sat there three hours with me, helping me pick out a name (13-13)
Lucas: a lot of Instagram accounts nowadays that help you actually 'come out' (14-23)
Freddie: I Googled 'I like boys and girls', and it said 'bisexual' (13-27)

Barriers

Charlotte: the community thrives within cities, rather than everywhere (18-2)

Lucas: you have to have your parents' consent and for them to ring up (10-10)

Lucas: a two-year waiting list for the gender clinic, to even be seen (11-24)

Charlotte: they are very...you know teaching the bare minimum (16-18)

Charlotte: there's no support group, there's no like you know, after school clubs (16-19)

Charlotte: amongst students it would be a nice thing (15-25)

Lucas: it's a lot harder to find a significant other...that is willing to understand and learn

Support as evolving

Lucas: over time, he became one of the most supportive ones (14-4)

Lucas: it's not just a transition for me, it's a transition for them too (9-14)

Lucas: He educates himself on the things he doesn't know as well (9-27)

Lucas: it's taken that time, that learning and that energy over the past few years (11-14)

Lucas: the worst part was...having those old people learn over time (21-20)