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# **LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood in a post-pandemic society**

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A Thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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# Abstract

This thesis explores LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood in a post-pandemic society. The premise of this research is that the COVID-19 pandemic has not been experienced as an 'equal' pandemic, yet there is a dearth of research on LGBT+ young people's experiences of the pandemic and no research that identifies the long-term impacts of the pandemic on this cohort. Moreover, the pandemic occurred during a critical life stage of becoming an adult for young people, whereby significant changes happen, and future opportunities are shaped. Despite its importance, much less is known about the experiences of LGBT+ young people transitioning to adulthood. This PhD research addresses these gaps with three novel approaches. First, it explores how LGBT+ young people navigate adult identity construction. Second, it utilises the theoretical concepts of 'biographical field' (Henderson et al., 2007) and 'critical moments' (Giddens, 1991; Thomson et al., 2002) to understand how the pandemic (2020-22) impacted the biographical fields most significant to adult identity development. Third, it employs an innovative research design using longitudinal biographical interviews and participatory scrapbooks over 12 months with 12 LGBT+ young people (aged between 18-30) in England, UK, providing unique and detailed insights into how specific biographical fields continue to be impacted by the pandemic, and what this means for participants' investment in adult identities. The findings of this thesis will include two parts. First, I will present the four adulthood markers that have been identified as important for LGBT+ young people, arguing that participants drew upon relational, cultural, and identity-based dimensions for shaping their approach to defining adulthood. These markers structure the following three chapters on how the pandemic continues to affect participants' youth transitions. I argue that the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s) acted as a turning point in the process of developing independence, impacting the biographical fields of education, employment, and living situation. I contend that circumstances of the pandemic reconfigured participants' post-pandemic priorities, leading to a renewed importance on friendship and

community, however the pandemic's impacts on working on these priorities persist. Finally, I explore how the pandemic was both an opportunity and hindrance for gender identity development, depending on participants' individual, interpersonal, and structural experiences. This research makes a significant empirical and methodological contribution to understanding LGBT+ young people's post-pandemic youth transitions.

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## **Declaration**

I confirm that no part of the material presented in this thesis has been previously submitted by me or any other person for a degree in this or any other university. In all cases, where it is relevant, material from the work of others has been acknowledged.

## **Statement of Copyright**

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Quite often, choosing a research topic in Sociology is often driven by personal experiences and motivation for the topic under study (Folkes, 2022; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2022). In this case, researchers are not just the tools to complete a study, but they are part of what they are studying. This was the case for me coming to this study. I was a young person that had my own transitions to adulthood impacted by the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, my own experiences of becoming an adult were highly resonant with young people's experiences that have been identified in previous research and will be explored throughout this thesis (Roberts et al., 1994; MacDonald et al., 2001).

In 2016, at the age of 18, I finished compulsory education when I completed my A-Levels, and I then went on to extend my educational career by going to university to study for a degree in Sociology. I decided to embark on this, like many other young people, to improve my career prospects and chances of entering a well-paid career that would help propel me in my transition to becoming an adult. In fact, throughout sixth form, the narrative was that going to university was the ideal and better destination in terms of career prospects, thus the alternative to university was never considered for me. After graduating from my degree, I faced a harsh reality that is increasingly facing young people finishing higher education; not enough graduate jobs that is proportionate to the number of young people completing undergraduate degrees. As such, I ended up spending a short period of my life unemployed and found that I had to readjust my approach to finding work, applying for entry level jobs just to get a 'foot in the door'. I remember at this time reflecting on my life and feeling that I was regressing away from achieving a sense of financial and emotional independence, and that my path to becoming an adult would take longer than I anticipated. I then fortunately entered the job market, albeit I found myself in a precarious, part-time, temporary, minimum wage job. Thus, I was

underemployed, whereby I was not receiving enough paid work and not doing work that made full use of my skills and abilities I had developed from university. Despite having started to earn my own money, the income from my part-time job did not give me a sense of having financial independence that would allow me to completely support myself. I was financially dependent on my partner, and still facing a big economic barrier that was blocking me from feeling like I had become an adult. Thus, my position in the youth labour market and gender were intertwined in the process through which my adult identity of independence was constructed.

In March 2020, when the pandemic hit England and social distancing restrictions were implemented, I lost my job. This was due to being on a temporary contract and my employers not being obliged to put me on furlough. As such, I found myself unemployed again for 6 months until I went back to university in September 2020 to study a master's in social research methods. During this period of being unemployed, I remember feeling despondent and that I was regressing further away from becoming an adult and becoming independent. Thus, I shared a common experience that has been identified in youth literature whereby my transitions to adulthood prior to and during the pandemic were non-linear, regressive at times, and extended due to wider structural factors facing young people (Furlong, 2017; King, 2015). While doing this PhD research, I still felt that I was on the path to becoming an adult as I felt that I had not yet achieved my personal markers of what being an adult meant to me. As such, I was still going through my own youth transitions alongside researching my participants' youth transitions.

It was also during this time of being unemployed during the pandemic that I decided to volunteer as a campaign researcher for a charity. This charity aims to raise awareness of some of the most pressing social issues society is facing, and to identify ways in which individuals can help support organisations/charities involved in tackling these issues. The first campaign I was placed on to research was researching issues facing LGBT+ people, whereby a significant component involved engaging with grey literature produced by LGBT+ organisations to create

campaign materials. It was through engaging with this grey literature that I was coming across early reports on how the pandemic was unequally impacting LGBT+ people (Batty, 2020; Stonewall, 2020a). It is due to my background of studying Sociology at undergraduate level that I have become more reflexive and critically minded over how different social groups may have different experiences of particular social phenomena, and how they may face harsher inequalities. Thus, my own experiences of the pandemic, combined with my inquisitive thinking, meant that I began wondering whether there might be valuable and interesting research to be done exploring how the pandemic was continuing to affect LGBT+ youth transitions. When I consulted the literature on the impacts of the pandemic on LGBT+ young people, I found that little research has explored LGBT+ young people's experiences on a more subjective and personal level. As such, they have had limited opportunities to be able to voice their own experiences of the pandemic and to tell people how the pandemic affected their transitions to adulthood. This led me to want to research the matter in greater detail, resulting in me proposing this research as a PhD project and formulating my overarching research question of understanding how the pandemic has affected LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood.

Positionality is something I return to in the methodology chapter. Here, I have given a short introduction to how I came to this topic of study as a young person whose own youth transitions continue to be impacted by the pandemic. In this regard, I am not an outsider in relation to this topic. However, I am also not a full insider in relation to my status as a cisgender, heterosexual woman. When thinking through these complicated issues of identity and positionality, I follow Hellowell's (2006) concept of 'liquid inbetweenness', in that researchers are very rarely a complete insider or outsider when it comes to research. I relate to this term, as it captures the in-betweenness that I feel characterises how I relate to this research.

In this introductory Chapter, I start by offering background context about why the pandemic was an unequal event and why people had different experiences of this phenomena. Having explored the unequal impacts of the pandemic, I will then

explore what is already known about what a post-pandemic society looks like, before unpacking why youth transitions are a significant aspect to the life course. Following this contextualising of the research, I then present a rationale, grounded in the academic literature, for why this research is worthy of further exploration. Here I will identify the research questions and explain how they address current gaps in understanding. Finally, I describe the overall structure of the thesis by offering a summary of each chapter, paying attention to the specific contributions made in each section as well as the key themes explored.

## 1.2 COVID-19

COVID-19 was announced as a global pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). Since then, social distancing restrictions were in England for two years, which were fully lifted in February 2022. Within those two years, there were three national lockdowns, with a brief three-tier system introduced in October 2020 for two months. This three-tier system involved more localised restrictions on how businesses were allowed to operate and how people were able to meet with each other depending on the rate of the virus in different areas (Quinn and McIntyre, 2020). There was the introduction of the new Coronavirus Job Retention scheme (known as furlough), whereby the state paid a proportion of people's wages if their place of work temporarily closed. Numerous changes were also made to the education system, including the opening and closing of buildings, how lessons were delivered, and how exams were completed (Institute for Government, 2022).

COVID-19 was a collective sacrifice; we all had to take on responsibility through social distancing to limit and prevent the virus spreading and to protect those most vulnerable. However, it was not experienced as an 'equal' pandemic by certain cohorts (Bengtsson et al., 2021). It has killed unequally, been experienced and responded to unequally, and will impact into the future unequally (Bristow and Gilland, 2020; MacDonald et al., 2023). One of those cohorts is (LGBT+) young people. For young people, COVID disrupted the familiarity of education,

family life, friendships, relationships, leisure, and the challenges of adulthood. Birthdays were cancelled, school leavers proms, graduations, and other important moments for young people were erased. This ended up characterising a youth that was lost because of the pandemic (Rasmussen et al., 2023). The pandemic intertwined with their youth transitions and young people were forced to either change or delay their life plans, “dropping a veil between them and their imagined futures” (Vehkalahti et al., 2021, p. 412). Thus, young people had to sacrifice a lot more than the average person, and it was clear this public health crisis would be epoch-defining for young people becoming adults (Bristow and Gilland, 2020). However, young people’s voices were rarely heard by politicians, scientists, and policymakers when it came to implementing social distancing measures (MacDonald et al., 2023). Instead, popular commentaries saw young people differentially positioned as ‘resilient’ and able to unproblematically ‘bounce back’ from the pandemic (Scott et al., 2023). Alternatively, during the pandemic, negative stereotypes about young people started to emerge, whereby they were seen as being delinquent and not abiding by social distancing rules, ‘killing their grannies’ (Freeman et al., 2023).

LGBT+ young people may have been especially impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. Grant and colleagues (2021) argue that disasters are a social phenomenon and the detrimental impacts can be unevenly distributed across social groups. The negative impacts of the pandemic on LGBT+ young people are likely to be formative, and it could mean that a return to pre-pandemic life may be experienced as frustrating, disappointing, or a step backwards in their youth transitions (Clarke and Carter, 2023). Whilst an evolving body of literature has focused on the impacts of the pandemic on young people, less attention has been paid to qualitative longitudinal, exploratory data (Scott et al., 2021). Current research has been exploratory, given the unfolding nature of the pandemic, and a link between the impacts of the pandemic on youth transitions is yet to be offered in research. Moreover, LGBT+ young people have been largely absent from much of the narrative on how COVID has impacted society unequally (LGBT Foundation, 2020). The research that has explored experiences of the pandemic

for LGBT+ young people has mostly been grey literature and has tended to take a quantitative, cross-sectional approach to studying the pandemic (McGowan et al., 2021). As such, more research is needed to address the gap of understanding about the subjective, lived experiences of the pandemic for LGBT+ young people.

### 1.3 Post-pandemic society

The British Academy (2021) has argued that the impact of COVID-19 is not coming to an end, and that we are now entering a 'COVID decade'. The impact of the pandemic is likely to have long-term issues for many people, particularly for LGBT+ young people who experienced the pandemic at a significant time in their life course. Scott and colleagues (2023) predicted that consequences are likely to cluster around mental health, social connections, and disruptions to education and employment. Thus, more research is needed to monitor how LGBT+ young people are navigating a post-pandemic society (LGBT Hero, 2021).

This research is especially timely given the changes that have occurred in a post-pandemic society. While conducting this research, because of a mix of domestic and international factors, the UK faced renewed economic uncertainty with spiralling inflation and a new cost of living crisis, financial collapse of the UK economy on world markets, new austerity cuts, and rising unemployment on the horizon (BBC News 2022). While these economic issues have not stemmed from the pandemic, they have coalesced with economic impacts of the pandemic. Furthermore, after the lockdowns there has been a rise in homophobic and transphobic hate crimes recorded by police in the UK (Clarke and Carter, 2023). There has also been a rise in 'gender critical' views whereby gender is seen as a 'dangerous' ideology. This has resulted in transgender people's bodies, lived experiences, and intimate associations being debated and contested on a public and political level. Thus, it is becoming harder to visualise a happy new chapter for LGBT+ young people (Bristow and Gilland, 2020).

However, very little has been published on the qualitative, longitudinal experiences of the pandemic for LGBT+ young people. Furthermore, research is yet to address how the pandemic is continuing to impact this cohort of young people through a youth transitions lens. Thus, long term research that focuses on LGBT+ young people's social, emotional, and cultural lives is essential so that services and society are in a better position to support this cohort, meet their needs, and shape a post-pandemic recovery. Without this data, we will not truly understand the impact of the pandemic for LGBT+ young people and how we can respond. Moreover, to ensure that society is better equipped to mitigate the negative impacts should another global crisis on this scale occur again, it is vital that we capture the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that LGBT+ young people have experienced.

## 1.4 Transitions to adulthood

Becoming an adulthood is a significant process in a young person's life course. It is where questions about personal values, attitudes, identity and the future are grappled with (Coleman, 2011), foundations for a 'healthy' adulthood are developed, and future life chances are established (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Thus, multiple and interconnected transitions are negotiated by young people, and it can be a time where they might be at their most vulnerable. Young people are the future and continued research into this biographical process is necessary to identify ways wider resources can help them navigate this complex biographical process.

Young people are also becoming adults surrounded by broader, socio-economic changes (Woodman and Wyn, 2016). Their lives are being changed alongside large-scale transitions in education, work, living situation, relationships, family, and lifestyle (ibid.). Thus, youth is an important and interesting stage of the life course because we can explore and understand the ways in which inequalities are reproduced and give us a vantage point from which we can observe the emergence of new trends and social transformations (Furlong, 2017). We have

seen this over the past few decades, evidenced by extended youth transitions for the majority of young people (Cote and Bynner, 2008). As such, this biographical process is likely to occur across many more years and the achievement of an adult status likely to happen at a later age, even up to the age of 30 (Arnett, 2000). Young people are now facing longer patterns of finishing education, starting employment, and living in the family home, in comparison to previous cohorts of young people (Settersten and Ray, 2010). This biographical process has become more complex and non-linear, even before a global, world-wide pandemic had taken place. Thus, the susceptibility of youth transitions to wider social changes makes research exploring the impacts of the pandemic on this biographical process even more essential.

Nevertheless, within the sociological field of youth transitions, much less is known about the experiences and perspectives of LGBT+ young people transitioning to adulthood, despite broad agreement that youth transitions are a significant developmental stage of the life course for young people (Arnett and Galambos, 2003). Much of the rhetoric of neoliberal governments has increasingly placed responsibility on the individual, emphasising that it is the individual who must make choices regarding work, health, intimacy and their identity. This emphasis on individual responsibility is giving way to increasingly individualised biographical patterns shaped by choice (Holland and Thomson, 2009). Thus, within the sociology of youth there has been an increased interest in the centrality of identity and the interplay of agency and structure (ibid.). Markers of adulthood and the challenges youth face are widely discussed among scholars, to which it is agreed that wider structural factors still influence the experiences of youth transitions and can lead to challenging barriers to achieving adult status (Cote and Bynner, 2008; Bynner, 2005; Evans, 2002). However, research has mostly focused on the experiences of youth transitions along social class lines as a structural factor, with very little within this field specifically investigating other structural factors such as sexuality and transgender identity (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2017). Research that has focused on LGBT+ youth transitions has mostly been based in the US, or primarily taken a risk approach to

understanding experiences. That is, they have focused mostly on how negative experiences of youth transitions for LGBT+ young people can lead to risk-taking behaviours, which has shifted attention away from how LGBT+ young people understand their transition to adulthood. Within this cohort, to my knowledge, no research has explored what adulthood means for transgender young people. They tend to get grouped together under the 'LGBT+' acronym, but they may have different conceptualisations and experiences of adulthood that is pertinent to their gender identity rather than sexuality. This study will seek to understand what adulthood means for this cohort, understanding the nuance behind these adult identities.

## 1.5 Rationale for research and research questions

Given the dearth of research which has critically explored the (long-term) impacts of the pandemic for LGBT+ young people and their youth transitions, this PhD research seeks to add to the evidence base by placing gender and sexual identities at the centre for understanding LGBT+ youth transitions to adulthood in a post-pandemic society. It will understand what attaining a successful adult identity means to LGBT+ young people, and how they see themselves getting to that point in terms of involvement with different biographical fields and what critical moments they would like to see happen in their lives, and when. The research will uncover how the past two and a half years of living through a global pandemic has impacted the various biographical fields of an LGBT+ young person's life that are relevant to their youth transitions. It will also use this background knowledge to further understand how they continue to be affected by the pandemic. To do so, I employ a qualitative longitudinal approach that centres around a series of repeat interviews with LGBT+ young people aged 18-30, and which uses scrapbooks for participants to reflect on their experiences of youth transitions in a post-pandemic society. The aim of this is to understand the interplay between choice and opportunity. That is, I am theoretically interested in understanding how participants exercise choice through their approach to

defining adulthood and what opportunities they want to access to secure these futures. The idea is to understand the changes and continuities in participants' everyday lives throughout data collection and whether participants have been able to access opportunities that support their youth transitions. This knowledge will be used to understand whether post-pandemic opportunity structures continue to affect participants' transitions to adulthood.

In order to comprehensively capture this experience, and to produce knowledge that aligns with the project rationale, the research is structured by the following set of research questions:

1. How do LGBT+ young people understand their adulthood?
2. How did the two and a half years of the pandemic (2020-2022) impact LGBT+ young people?
3. How might the pandemic be continuing to affect the transition to their markers of adulthood?

## 1.6 Thesis structure

In terms of structure, following this *Introduction* will be two literature review chapters. In Chapter 2, *Growing up as LGBT+ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, it will analyse the social transformations occurring in England leading up to the pandemic and their implications for the experiences of LGBT+ young people. The purpose of tracing life before the pandemic is to understand how the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and created new challenges for LGBT+ young people. This chapter will establish a foundation for exploring the relationship between broader social changes and transitions to adulthood.

Chapter 3, *LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood*, details the underpinning theoretical frameworks that have guided this project. Here, I draw attention to youth transitions theory, which is the lens through which I have approached each findings chapter. I also draw on queer and transgender theory for understanding the social world, analysing the underpinning discourses

around cis-heteronormative structures that LGBT+ young people are becoming adults in. The chapter also reviews existing empirical on how LGBT+ young people construct adult identities, leading into a discussion of the value of subcultural and peer network thinking in providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in LGBT+ youth transitions.

Chapter 4, *Methodology*, is split into two parts. In the first instance I describe my methodological approach to understanding this phenomenon, which draws on qualitative longitudinal biographical interviews and scrapbooking. I underpin this discussion with key methodological literature on the kinds of knowledge these methods produce, and the usefulness of these to addressing the research questions outlined in this *Introduction*. In the latter part of the chapter, I provide an explanation of what happened when these methods were applied in practice. Here, I offer a reflective account of what happened from recruitment and sampling to data collection. By structuring the chapter in this way, I explore the opportunities and challenges that can arise when putting methods into practice, in the context of researching LGBT+ youth transitions.

Chapter 5, *Markers of adulthood*, is the first empirical chapter that addresses the first research question; how do LGBT+ young people understand their transition to adulthood? The chapter begins by drawing on citizenship literature for exploring how LGBT+ young people approach defining their adult identities. I contend that participants' gender and/or sexual identity results in a narrative of difference regarding societal expectations for their transition into adulthood. Their identities influence the values they place on the markers of adulthood they identify as important to them. The chapter then explores the four adulthood markers identified as important to participants: independence, access to inclusive communities, surrounded by close and supportive networks, and thriving in identity. I argue that LGBT+ young people draw upon relational, cultural, and identity-based dimensions for shaping their approach to defining adulthood. These adulthood markers will then be used to structure the following three chapters on how the pandemic is continuing to affect their youth transitions, addressing the second and third research questions.

Chapter 6, *Critical moment(s) of lockdown(s)*, I employ Giddens (1991) and Thomson et al.'s (2002) theories on fateful and fatalistic moments to understand how the lockdowns acted as critical moments and turning point for participants' progress to the adulthood marker *Independence*. It focuses respectively on the biographical fields of education, employment and living situation. It explores how the lockdown(s) were responded to at a policy, institutional, and individual level, how difference in response affected participants' experiences in those fields, and how it continues to impact them in a post-pandemic society. Throughout the chapter, I also bring in longitudinal case histories of participants whose experiences reflect a broader pattern in the data in terms of similar responses.

Chapter 7, *Re-appreciation for friendship and communities*, focuses on the two adulthood markers 'Close and supportive networks' and 'Engagement with inclusive communities'. It contends that the circumstances of the pandemic resulted in adult identities being re-worked to one where more importance and priority has been placed on these two adulthood markers for coming into a post-pandemic society. It draws on the theoretical argument that access to adult identities can be constrained by the wider social structure (Bynner, 2005) and expands on this argument through a post-pandemic lens. It argues that how friendships and communities have been re-approached in a post-pandemic society continue to be shaped by how they were impacted by the pandemic, both in positive and negative ways.

Chapter 8, *Identity exploration*, is the last empirical chapter that focuses on the fourth adulthood marker 'Thriving in identity'. It focuses exclusively on gender identity and argues that the pandemic led to varying experiences in identity development, depending on what happened to trans participants at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural level. Some participants discovered new information about their identity, and some participants felt the pandemic delayed the progress they were making pre-pandemic. It draws on how both social and medical transitions were impacted, and how coming into a post-pandemic society there has been an increase in pressure to pass. It will draw on Butler's (1990, 2006) work on how sex, gender, sexuality and gendered bodies are

structurally organised, and how this is affecting participants' sense of self. It argues that there has been a clear difference in terms of how participants have responded to this pressure, exploring how it has exacerbated social inequalities.

In the *Conclusion* I detail the contributions of this research, both theoretical and empirical. In view of these insights, I make a number of recommendations for future scholarship that would build on and extend the significant findings from this research. Following this, I offer some reflections on the research process, considering possible limitations to the research presented here.

# **Chapter 2 – Growing up as LGBT+ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

## **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I explore the wider sociopolitical context LGBT+ young people are becoming adults in. Prior to the pandemic, today's LGBT+ young people were growing up in markedly different circumstances to those that previous generations experienced. In many respects, LGBT+ young people were facing increased levels of insecurity and uncertainty that were impacting how their transitions to adulthood were being experienced. To fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on LGBT+ young people, it is important to first examine the pressures and challenges they were already facing.

The chapter will begin with an analysis of neoliberalism and its influence on LGBT+ young people. Following this, I will critically assess how political discourses related to neoliberalism have unequally impacted LGBT+ individuals and the implications for their transitions to adulthood. This discussion will provide essential context for understanding the wider sociocultural context in which LGBT+ young people were already becoming adults, which will be explored in the subsequent section, 'Life before the pandemic'. The following section, 'Life during the pandemic', will offer insight into how the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities LGBT+ young people were experiencing, and created new ones.

## **2.2 Neoliberalism: The age of active citizenship and individual responsibility**

To understand the complexities of young people's lives there is value in taking a 'political economy perspective' (Cote, 2014, 2016; France and Threadgold, 2016; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Kelly, 2018). That is, researchers need to grasp the

political economy of the recent decades, which includes the past decades of neoliberal reforms and austerity. MacDonald and King (2021, p. 24) put strongly that a political economy perspective is “necessary” to fully understand the socio-economic conditions that young people face, and the opportunities open to them in their youth transitions and wider lives.

We are deep in a neoliberal era, which offers little consolation for the harsh realities young people now face (Bessant et al., 2017). Neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology that positions the private market as the answer to everything (Monbiot, 2016). It maintains that private markets work best without outside interference from government or union powers, thus any barriers to the workings of the market should be eliminated through various kinds of deregulation (Kotz, 2002). Moreover, neoliberalism views the move of previously public functions and services into the private sphere of the market as an unquestionable common sense. Therefore, neoliberalism resembles a reduced involvement of the welfare state and its collective social responsibility towards its citizens (Edmiston, 2017; Cooper, 2023).

A key aspect of neoliberalism is its emphasis on moving away from passive welfare dependency to promoting active citizenship. Active citizenship effectively emphasises greater centrality of individual responsibility and active participation (Cooper, 2023; Smith et al., 2005). As such, individuals are expected to be entrepreneurs of the self and to manage their own lives proactively, taking responsibility for their own success and self-governance (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Individuals are encouraged to be flexible, innovative, and to not blame failure on structural conditions but to a lack of personal entrepreneurial development (France, 2016; Kelly, 2006). Consequently, individuals are urged to continually improve themselves, including their bodies, minds, and lifestyles (Dean, 2009; du Bois-Reymond, 2009).

During the 1980s, the UK experienced a neoliberal shift in its strategy for fostering active citizenship. This shift in policy framework can be clearly demonstrated through three salient instances of welfare reform policy agendas (Davies, 2012).

The first includes the Thatcherite Conservative era which foresaw initiatives to roll back the welfare state, resulting in substantial cuts and constraints on public spending for welfare provisions (Hills, 1998). The second concerns the New Labour approach and Blair's slogan of "no rights without responsibilities", which emphasised the need for individuals to carry out their citizenry obligations (Dwyer, 2004; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). The third is the political project of austerity initiated by the UK Coalition government since 2010, aimed at economic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis and reducing government deficits. This focus on reducing government deficits has remained a priority for successive Conservative-led governments over the past 14 years. Although neoliberalism is not inherently linked to austerity, there is a notable connection between the two. Austerity measures in the UK have not only reinforced existing long-term trends but have also introduced a distinct shift towards a more pronounced neoliberal model (Crisp and Powell, 2017; Bessant et al., 2017; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). Under austerity, there has been a notable reduction in state-funded services, an expansion of privatising public services, increased conditionality in welfare entitlements, and harsher benefit sanctions (Gill and De Benedictis, 2016). Thus, austerity represents not only an economic strategy but also a site of ideological and discursive contention, increasingly emphasising individual responsibility over rights within the framework of citizenship (Jensen and Tyler, 2012; Roberts et al., 2018). These austerity policies have exacerbated challenges for LGBT+ young people, who now face additional difficulties and limited support as they navigate their transition to adulthood amidst a challenging socio-economic environment.

Neoliberalism also has implications for how transitions to adulthood are understood and experienced. In the UK, current neoliberal policies encourage a certain subjectivity in young people; one that is highly flexible, mobile, and self-directed (Mackie, 2019). The notion of 'choice' is particularly strong in current public discourse, with expectations that young people will act as 'relational planners' to determine their own paths into adulthood (Mackie, 2016). However, this emphasis on choice has resulted in ongoing challenges for young people to

navigate their identities and future aspirations, with not all choices being equally accepted by the state and society (Kelly, 2006). The following section will argue that the idea of ‘choice’ continues to be political, with certain options being more accepted than others by the state and society. For LGBT+ young people, this means that their transitions to adulthood may be scrutinised differently, affecting their access to citizenship privileges based on societal and state perceptions of their choices. This raises questions about whether such normative neoliberal standards are truly inclusive of the diverse identities and backgrounds of the UK’s evolving population.

### 2.2.1 Citizenship as a universalist ideal? Neoliberal othering

The neoliberal framework, with its emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility, creates discursive spaces for individuals to cultivate unique identities (Giddens, 1991). However, this ideology has been criticised for its inherent contradictions, being “both tolerant and intolerant” of diverse identities (Parekh, 2005 p. 82). Thus, neoliberalism privileges some identities over others, namely those of white, Western, cisgendered, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied men (Calafell, 2007, 2010). Moreover, neoliberalism works to “maintain hierarchy through the legitimation of othering” (Jones and Calafell, 2012 p. 957), with citizenship and rights playing a key role in this divisive dynamic. Access to citizenship rights and benefits is often contingent upon conformity to and assimilation within the hegemonic order (Jones and Calafell, 2012; Plummer, 2005). Thus, citizenship has had a long, turbulent history of it being one of exclusion and struggle as well as about membership and integration (Hall et al., 1998). For LGBT+ individuals, their ability to fully exercise the rights associated with citizenship can be limited by their personal choices and the level of recognition they receive within society. This affects not only their social status and treatment, but also influences the development of services and policies, and affects their self-perception and perceived societal value (Hines, 2009; Smith et

al., 2005). LGBT+ youth, in particular, may experience a heightened sense of social exclusion as they transition into adulthood.

For today's LGBT+ young people, they are growing up in an era marked by significant legal reforms aimed at eliminating discrimination against LGBT+ individuals. Since 1997, numerous laws that discriminated against LGBT+ people have been repealed, particularly in areas such as employment, access to goods and services, and personal relationships. Notable legislative changes include the equalisation of the age of sexual consent in 2000, the equalising of legislations affecting fostering and adoption in 2002, the repeal of Section 28 in England in 2003, the right for transgender people to alter the gender on their birth certificate in 2004, the introduction of civil partnerships in 2004, the introduction of the Equalities Act in 2010, which protects sexuality and gender identity under anti-discrimination laws, and the legalising of same-sex marriage in 2013. These have been key, progressive gains for LGBT+ citizens making them visible in a human rights framework. Furthermore, the increase in cultural visibility and organisation of transgender social movements have brought issues of gender diversity into the public and political arena, especially around health and welfare (Hines et al., 2018). This increased visibility has meant that wider understandings of gender identity being fixed at birth are changing across social, cultural, political, and policy spheres.

Although the advancements in LGBT+ rights represent significant progress and should be acknowledged and celebrated, Weeks (2007) cautions against overlooking the normative ideals that these policy changes reinforce. It is essential to critically assess who within the LGBT+ community remains marginalised or excluded from fully benefitting from these reforms. Duggan's (2002) concept 'homonormativity' is useful to explore how equalising legislation leave heteronormative ideals uncontested, including only those LGB+ people who conform to these norms while excluding those who do not. As discussed in the previous section on neoliberalism, this ideology relies on private solutions to problems thereby placing more importance on the role of the family as the provider of goods and services, such as caregiving for the young and elderly

(Edelman, 2004; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Consequently, the extension of rights to LGB+ individuals, such as the ability to form families and enter same-sex monogamous relationships or marriages, supports the neoliberal ideology by reinforcing traditional family structures. However, these narrow conceptualisations of family and relationships do not support the right to develop a multitude of different kinds of relationships that may also provide caring labour (Donovan et al., 1999; Robinson, 2016).

Moreover, with regard to transgender identities, the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) (2004) remains entrenched in a binary understanding of gender, acknowledging only 'male' and 'female' categories (Hines et al., 2018). This binary framework thus reinforces conventional cisgender norms and fails to adequately encompass a broader range of diverse gender identities, such as non-binary identities. Furthermore, the process to gain a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) has been characterised as pathologising and slow (Hines, 2010). This procedure requires a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria and the submission of medical records detailing diagnoses, psychiatric assessments, and documentation of medical intervention. GRC decisions are made on the grounds of gendered authenticity, at the heart of which is a clear match between an individual's declared gender identity and their external presentation of that identity. This approach reinforces assumptions of gender as static and intrinsically linked to embodied and physical dimensions (Hines, 2009). Therefore, while societal understandings of gender being fixed at birth are changing, understandings of it being linked to sex remain entrenched, perpetuating the assumption that gender and sex must align with one another.

Concerns regarding the intrusive, inaccessible, and daunting nature of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) led to a parliamentary Transgender Equality Enquiry between 2015 and 2016. The published report from this inquiry highlighted that the evidence required for gender recognition, as set out in the 2004 GRA, was a significant problem area (Hines and Santos, 2018). In response, the government initiated a public consultation in 2018 to explore potential reforms to the GRA. However, this consultation sparked significant controversy

by many Gender Critical (GC) feminists, who argued that the proposed changes would undermine women's rights (McLean, 2021). This controversy has given rise to a highly toxic discourse in the UK, predominantly focused on the issue of 'single-sex' spaces. Gender Critical feminism advocates for reserving women's spaces exclusively for cis [non-trans] women, framing trans women as predatory, dangerous and essentially male (Jones and Slater, 2020 and McLean, 2021). Gender critical views reflect a biological essentialist perspective that assert that humans are born with certain sexual characteristics which can never be changed (Hines, 2020). Although anti-trans feminist views represent a minority within mainstream feminism, they have become increasingly vocal in recent years, buoyed by support from some feminists with high media profiles (ibid.). Moreover, gender critical beliefs are protected from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, which allows for such viewpoints to be expressed without facing discrimination (Brione, 2022). As a result of this debate over 'single-sex' spaces, Gender Critics have found support within both houses of parliament, leading to a decision to forego broader reforms to gender recognition laws. The only adjustment made was a reduction in the cost of obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) from £140 to £5 (BBC News, 2020b). Successive Conservative governments since Theresa May's administration have also focused on protecting single-sex spaces from transgender individuals (BBC Sport, 2022; Lawrie, 2024). Consequently, the process of obtaining a GRC remains intrusive and daunting, and trans people continue to face scrutiny and marginalisation. Moreover, Gender Critical perspectives have reinforced cisgender norms regarding how women's bodies should appear in order to be recognised and valued (Hines, 2020).

As the above policy section has critically argued, the granting of LGBT+ rights through legislative change have resulted in a circumscription of sexual and gendered identities, and they will be tolerated so long as they stay within the boundaries of that tolerance (Hines, 2009). Thus, it is essential to address the conditionality associated with access to these rights and the exclusions it creates. Hines (2009) argues that it has created a divisive dichotomy between

who is an 'ideal' citizen/'ideal' LGBT+ person and who is *not*. Donovan and colleagues (1999) argued towards the end of the 20th century, when legislative changes primarily considered lesbians and gay men, that the lack of recognition and validation of LGBT+ relationships significantly impacted how LGBT+ people felt their choices were perceived and accommodated for. Despite subsequent legislative changes, I would argue this argument remains relevant today regarding how LGBT+ individuals can construct their families and relationships. Furthermore, current issues such as the limitation of the GRA 2004 and ongoing debates over transgender rights highlight that transgender individuals still face challenges in living with their bodies, and expressing their self-identified gender. These issues underscore the continued relevance of Donovan et al.'s (1999) observations in understanding the present-day dynamics of LGBT+ citizenship and rights.

The social construction of citizenship also has significant implications for LGBT+ young people and their transitions to adulthood. Traditionally, adulthood and citizenship have been seen as synonymous with becoming an adult and seen as a process that eventually leads to full citizenship in society (Hall et al., 1998; Thomson et al., 2004). Thus, finishing education, leaving the family home, entering employment, getting married, and starting a family are seen as responsibilities that young people have to uptake as part of becoming an adult to receive citizenship rights. As already argued and will be further explored in Chapter 3, these expectations of adulthood are infused with heteronormative and cisgendered expectations (Torkelson, 2012). Furthermore, research indicates that the process of becoming an adult influences young people's sense of citizenship and how the state views their status, which in turn impacts their self-perception (Lister et al, 2003; Smith et al., 2005). Therefore, LGBT+ young people are becoming adults in a society with dominant expectations for adulthood, where deviations from these expectations are often viewed as deviant (Kneale and French, 2018 and Taylor, 2010a). As they navigate these societal expectations, they also become increasingly aware of how non-conformity might

affect their treatment and perception by the state, highlighting the differential and contingent nature of citizenship experiences.

Over the past decade, progressive steps have led to the development of diverse citizenship models, reflecting a shift towards greater inclusivity. These models recognise that certain groups have specific needs and perspectives that cannot be simply subsumed into a general, universalist ideal of citizenship (Lister et al., 2003; Lister, 2007). Discussion of sexual and intimate citizenship have emerged that seek to include individuals who identify as LGBT+ and who may be excluded from hegemonic understandings of citizenship (Donovan et al., 1999; Weeks, 1998). These discussions aim to make citizenship more inclusive by recognising a diversity of social practices and rejecting the notion of a singular, idealised model (Plummer, 1996). Sexual citizenship is about the democratisation of relationships and families, incorporating a range of narratives concerning social and sexual matters (Donovan et al., 1999; Weeks, 1998). Intimate citizenship is about rights and obligations to more personal, intimate lifestyles and identities such as having control over one's body, feelings, having access to different representations, and having choice about identity and gendered experiences (Plummer, 2005).

Arguments on the theorising and exclusionary nature of citizenship will be conceptually important for understanding the first research question of what adulthood means for LGBT+ young people. As Chapter 3 will argue, there is a notable gap in youth studies regarding LGBT+ young people's transition to adulthood, which this study aims to address. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, it is essential to examine how broader cis-heteronormative structures impact this biographical process. This section has established that citizenship is a useful concept for analysing the exclusionary aspects of a cis-heteronormative society. However, existing studies that address gender and/or sexual identity through a citizenship framework are outdated. Richardson (2017) advocates for a renewed examination of this topic to assess the ongoing relevance of previous arguments. By understanding how LGBT+ young people define and discuss their transition to adulthood, this research will utilise the

concept of citizenship to evaluate whether the current literature remains applicable to contemporary society.

## 2.3 Life before the pandemic

### 2.3.1 Education and employment

With the deepening of neoliberalism in the UK's political system, there has been a shift towards a knowledge-based economy where nation-states exchange ideas, technology and strategies (Brown et al., 2011). This created a high demand for educated individuals to drive the development of innovative technologies that would generate prosperity for enterprising companies and would result in upward mobility as a reward for their educational investment (ibid.). Thus, the UK set out to both invest in getting more young people from diverse backgrounds into Higher Education (HE), and invest in enterprising companies (France, 2016). As a result, a neoliberal cultural belief has emerged whereby those who invest in their education will be rewarded with better economic opportunities (Cuervo et al., 2013). This belief has led to a steady increase in the number of young people pursuing post-compulsory education (Furlong, 2018; King, 2015).

However, the 2008 financial crisis disrupted these plans, and the UK has not upheld its promise of investing in a knowledge economy (Brown et al., 2011). As a result, there is now an oversupply of graduates competing for the same job opportunities, intensifying competition in an already congested graduate labour market (Brooks, 2017; Brown et al., 2011; France, 2016). The number of university students continues to increase, driven by universities' financial incentives to recruit more students, making today's generation the most educated yet also the most burdened by student debt (Blackman and Rogers, 2017; Furlong et al., 2018). Consequently, young people are increasingly going to greater lengths to differentiate themselves, including undertaking extra-curricular activities and pursuing post-graduate qualifications (Brooks, 2017).

Educational changes have also coincided with labour market conditions worsening for young people in the UK (Furlong et al., 2018). Wider changes in the economy have resulted in a collapse in the youth labour market, making it harder for young people to enter, remain, and advance within employment with opportunities insecure and fragmented (Furlong, 2017; France, 2016; Rugg and Quilgars, 2015). Consequently, securing a job for life has become increasingly rare, with young people likely to move between different types of employment throughout their lives. This job churning is particularly concerning for LGBT+ young people. This is because studies by Stonewall (2013; 2020) have frequently found that LGBT+ young people are likely to encounter bullying and discrimination in the workplace either from colleagues, customers, and service users. As a result, they may be more likely to switch jobs to avoid hostile work environments.

Even when entering the job market, young people earn substantially lower incomes compared to older generations and face growing economic burdens of deprivation, inequality, and disadvantage (Bessant et al., 2017). During the 2008 recession, while all income earners experienced reduced pay, those aged 16-24 faced the most significant cuts (ibid.), highlighting how young people are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns. Economic prosperity is even more dire for those who leave education at the compulsory school-leaving age, known as the 'missing middle'. Brozsely and Nixon (2022) argue that these young people are at a higher risk of poor labour market outcomes compared to previous generations. Morris (2023) found that it takes on average 1 month longer to find any sort of employment, and 7 months longer to find secure, full-time employment compared to young people with higher-level qualifications. This can result in what has been depicted as 'pinballing' (Cuzzocrea, 2020), where young people invest considerable energy in completing apprenticeships and undertaking training-related work to avoid low-quality jobs, but frequently end up in such positions anyway. Brozsely and Nixon (2022) note that this mindset of accepting any employment can persist into adulthood, with some developing a sense of gratitude merely for being employed.

Considering changes in the labour market conditions for young people, binary categories of 'employed' and 'unemployed' are no longer useful for understanding conditions facing young people. There are many gradations between employment and unemployment that need to be considered, such as underemployment and part-time work (Cuervo et al., 2013). Underemployment refers to situations where workers are engaged in less than full-time or irregular work, or in roles that do not fully utilise their skills or abilities. Part-time work refers to jobs with fewer hours compared to full-time positions. Both underemployment and part-time work involve income insecurity, unstable working hours, and limited benefits.

Underemployment has become the norm for young people in the UK, driven by a shortage of suitable jobs for those who have invested in acquiring high-level skills through Higher Education (France, 2016; MacDonald, 2011). Securing a graduate job is marked by persistent inequalities related to social class, gender, and ethnicity, as the recruitment process often involves multiple assessment stages that favour graduates who can mobilise and embody valued capital (Ingram and Allen, 2018). This means that many graduates struggle to find positions that match their skillsets. As a result, it is now common for graduates to take low-skilled jobs well below their level of training, with it taking an average of 5 to 10 years to secure a career that aligns with their qualifications (France, 2016). Consequently, employers often hire for non-graduate roles from a pool of highly qualified candidates, disadvantaging non-graduates. For instance, the OECD reported in 2018 that a quarter of graduates in England and Northern Ireland were employed in jobs requiring only school-leaver qualifications (Weale, 2018). Thus, the neoliberal promise that self-entrepreneurialism and investment in education would lead to better quality jobs has proven illusory. The UK now faces a hidden pool of graduate talent whose potential is not being recognised in their current employment (Gardiner, 2014; Lorinc et al., 2020), with governments struggling to address this issue effectively.

Since the end of the twentieth century, service sector jobs have surged, with young people holding low educational qualifications more likely to be

represented in these jobs compared to adults. These jobs are often characterised by part-time or temporary contracts, minimum wage income, and irregular working hours (France, 2016). According to the UK's largest survey of LGBT+ people, LGBT+ young people are more likely to work in the service sector (Government Equalities Office, 2019). Part-time work has become increasingly common among young people, many of whom seek additional hours and thus juggle multiple jobs to earn a full-time wage (Furlong, 2017). Since the 2010 Coalition government, two major developments have further increased the prevalence of casual and temporary work: the rise of unpaid internships and zero-hour contracts. Zero-hour contracts mean that an employer does not have to guarantee any set number of working hours to the worker. Although zero-hour contracts are not exclusive to young people, they are significantly more likely to be employed on a zero-hour contract (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2018; Squires and Goldsmith, 2017). MacDonald (2017) noted that forms of precarious work during youth have become integral to adult working life, suggesting that this unstable labour market is not merely a transitional phase but rather a prolonged state that impacts financial independence. Historically, disadvantaged positions in the labour market were mainly occupied by less educated and working-class young people. However, the precarious labour market is now increasingly affecting highly educated young people who are underemployed (France, 2016; Furlong et al., 2018; MacDonald, 2017; Shildrick et al., 2010).

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the number of unemployed young people over 16 has consistently remained above 750,000 annually in the UK (Youth Futures Foundation, 2020). Even more worryingly is that LGBT+ young people, especially transgender young people, are more likely to experience prolonged periods of unemployment (Government Equalities Office, 2019). Research indicates that LGBT+ young people often fear discrimination during recruitment or while at work, which may deter them from applying for jobs (Youth Futures Foundation, 2021). Additionally, past experiences of discrimination can lead them to avoid job searching for extended periods (Stonewall, 2020b). Despite a decline in youth unemployment levels before the pandemic, the number of young people not in

education, employment, or some form of training (NEET) has consistently remained above 10% (Lorinc et al., 2020). Hutchinson and colleagues (2016) found that most NEET individuals are in the older youth age category, indicating that NEET status is a long-term issue related to labour market engagement. While NEET status is rarely continuous, characterised by periods of engagement and disengagement with employment, prolonged NEET spells can have significant long-term consequences. These include adverse effects on future job opportunities, earnings, and personal wellbeing, such as decreased self-esteem, distress, depression, and anxiety (Lorinc et al., 2020).

In summary, young people are increasingly facing long-term economic instability, characterised by frequent movement between low-pay and no-pay work within the precarious labour market. This has resulted in predictable patterns of insecurity for many young people, regardless of their position within the qualification hierarchy (King, 2015). The decline in employment stability and the rise in precarious work represent a significant shift in the generational experience of youth (MacDonald, 2017).

### 2.3.2 Living situation and family

Terms like 'generation rent' have emerged to describe the challenges young people faced before the pandemic in relation to their living situation (Blackman and Rogers, 2017). Despite home ownership being a cultural aspiration in the UK, the escalating cost of housing over recent decades has financially excluded many young people from the housing market. With incomes remaining precarious and house prices high, achieving home ownership continues to be a distant goal for many (Bessant et al., 2017). Additionally, the resurgence of landlordism has resulted in a housing market predominantly dominated by private rentals (Furlong et al., 2018). Private rental costs in the UK are notably high, with the country having one of the most expensive housing markets among developed nations. For instance, Clarke et al. (2016) found that the average renter

in the UK spends around 47% of their income on rent, compared to the European average of 28%. While social housing might be an ideal, cheaper option for helping the transition to independent living, it has no policy traction under the neoliberal perspective, which views it as impeding aspiration and fostering economic dependence on the state (Jones, 2002; Rugg and Quilgars, 2015). Consequently, young people are likely to remain in their parental homes longer than the previous millennial generation, either to save for a house deposit (Sandberg-Thoma et al., 2015), or until they can secure reasonably priced rent in a house share (Fuster et al., 2023). Alternatively, they may experience a cycle of moving between independent living and returning to their parent home if they can no longer afford rent (Rugg and Quilgars, 2015).

Changes in the housing sector have also impacted families and their role in supporting young adult children. There is now a strong expectation that parents will continue to provide economic and emotional support as their children transition into adulthood. Consequently, many young people find themselves in an extended state of semi-dependency, making progress in other aspects of their lives while still relying on their families (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). This situation necessitates renegotiation of family relationships, with a shift toward a more equitable dynamic (Coleman, 2011). It raises complex questions about responsibility for the welfare of young people, placing much of this burden on families within the framework of neoliberal policies. For LGBT+ young people, this situation can be particularly challenging, as they may face rejection or lack of support from their families due to their identity (Barras and Jones, 2023; Katz-Wise et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2019). Consequently, some LGBT+ young people may not be able to rely on familial support and receive minimal assistance with their housing by the state. This lack of support can lead to unstable housing situations and an increased risk of homelessness (McConnell et al., 2016; Schmitz and Tyler, 2018a,b; Watson et al., 2019), significantly impacting their transition to adulthood. With reduced state housing support, finding new accommodation can be challenging, and LGBT+ young people may face

discrimination or end up in unsafe housing (Stonewall, 2018). As a result, their living situations can be more precarious compared to others.

### 2.3.3 Community and social support

LGBT+ communities and social support groups are important for LGBT+ young people, offering what Taulke-Johnson (2008) calls a 'golden opportunity' to explore and develop their gender and/or sexual identities, be their authentic selves, and be surrounded by a supportive network. These spaces play a crucial role in supporting their personal, social, and educational development (Ord and Davies, 2022). However, the accessibility and type of support available to young people in the UK is influenced by their geographical location, shaping the scale and type of support they can access (Maguire, 2021; Wenham et al., 2023). Urban areas often offer a rich variety of LGBT+ communities, allowing individuals to develop and express their identities freely, making urban and sexual freedoms closely intertwined (Casey, 2004). In contrast, LGBT+ people living in rural areas frequently face challenges in accessing visible forms of LGBT+ support, with fewer support groups and more pronounced stigmatising social climates (Formby, 2017; Marlin et al., 2023). Hulko and Hovane (2018) found that LGBT+ young people living in rural areas often feel they are always on display due to experiencing a dissonance between who they are and the small number of people living in the community policing who they should be. Although moving to large urban cities is a goal for many LGBT+ young people seeking safety and community (Government Equalities Office, 2019), rising costs have made relocations increasingly difficult, especially as the youth labour market continues to remain unstable.

Even in urban spaces, opportunities to access LGBT+ communities, spaces, and support groups have been diminishing due to austerity cuts and economic impacts, resulting in the closure of many such venues. These spaces have often been concentrated in the nighttime economy, leaving few alternatives (Formby, 2020). The reduction in LGBT-friendly spaces has been a significant concern, as

studies indicate it has led to increased feeling of isolation and forced LGBT+ individuals to modify their behaviour to avoid appearing 'openly' LGBT+ to protect their safety (Government Equalities Office, 2019). These changes raise critical questions about the impact on LGBT+ youth transitions and how the pandemic has exacerbated challenges in accessing LGBT+ communities.

### 2.3.4 Transgender healthcare and youth mental health

A decade of austerity measures has profoundly impacted institutions in the UK, particularly in relation to healthcare. This is notably evident in the provision of gender-affirming healthcare for transgender individuals. Prior to the pandemic, the NHS operated seven Gender Identity Clinics (GICs) in England, with only one clinic specifically serving young people under 18 years. A 2016 BBC report found that the demand for GIC's increases each year by 25-30% (BBC News, 2016), revealing a significant mismatch between the growing need and the limited availability of clinics. A report by Mitchel and colleagues (2013) found that waiting times for GIC services increased under austerity measures, and the offer from gender reaffirming services was scaled back. Before the pandemic, waiting times for GIC services ranged from 18 months to 4 years (Amery, 2016; Whitehead, 2017), far exceeding the NHS target of 18 weeks for non-urgent care (NHS, 2019). This discrepancy suggests that transgender services were deprioritised under government policies. Long waiting times can be extremely distressing and reinforce gender dysphoric feelings (Carlile, 2019) and have even led some to purchasing their own hormones from online or using private clinics (Stonewall, 2018). This will only be an option for those who have the financial means to do so.

Experiences within the healthcare system have also been mixed and stigmatising. Wright and colleagues (2021) found varying levels of knowledge about transgender issues among GPs, with some being more knowledgeable and attentive than others. This discrepancy can affect how cooperative GPs are in addressing their patients' needs; those less familiar with transgender issues may

refer patients to mental health services before GIC referrals, while those with more expertise may refer them directly to a GIC (ibid.). Although referrals to mental health services may be appropriate where depression, anxiety, and suicidality are present, the over-reliance on this reinforces the stereotype that being transgender is more a mental health issue and may impact how seriously individuals are taken. NHS GICs offer gender-affirming treatments to support individuals in aligning their physical bodies with their gender identity, whether they identify as male, female, or non-binary (NHS, 2020). However, within GICs, staff may gatekeep access to gender-affirming healthcare, often restricting it to those whose gender presentation aligns into the male/female binary (Carlile, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). This exclusionary practice further highlights the pervasive influence of cisnormative structures within various institutions.

Transgender healthcare under the NHS has faced long-standing criticism for causing harm to trans people, with reports of pathologisation, coercion and inadequate care (Pearce, 2018). Trans children's healthcare has become a topic of political interest, with some politicians questioning the validity of, or calling for the removal of access to, trans children's healthcare (Horton, 2024). Within this politicised and challenging context, in 2020 NHS England commissioned the 'Cass Review', led by paediatrician Dr Hilary Cass, to investigate gender identity services for trans children and young people. The Cass Review found insufficient evidence regarding the use of puberty-blocking drugs in under-18's. Consequently, in March 2024, NHS England decided that puberty blockers would no longer be considered routine treatment for children under 18 with gender dysphoria (BBC News, 2024). The review also stated that gender-affirming hormones should only be prescribed when there is a clear clinical rationale, and that individuals should first engage with mental health services (ibid.). Furthermore, the review was cited to justify the closure of the UK's only dedicated gender identity clinic for children and young people, which closed in March 2024 (Andersson and Rhoden-Paul, 2022). Although the NHS Children and Young People's Gender service was established in April 2024 as a replacement, with hubs in North West England and London, concerns have emerged about patient

transfers, including potential appointment cancellations and unintentional removal of patients from waiting lists (Parry, 2024). Overall, the Cass Review and its recommendations have been criticised for its substandard and inconsistent use of evidence, unethical and pathologising recommendations, and the exclusion of service users and trans healthcare experts from the Review process (Horton, 2024). Most significantly, the Review exerts cisgender power over trans communities and fails to uphold trans individuals' rights to equitable healthcare (ibid.).

All the above points taken together and the uncertainty and worries that surround LGBT+ young people and their futures mean that LGBT+ young people are significantly more likely to have poorer mental health compared to their heterosexual and cisgendered peers. For instance, LGBT+ young people are likely to have issues around life satisfaction stemming from a sense of discomfort at being LGBT+ in the UK (Government Equalities Office, 2018). Furthermore, during their transitions to adulthood LGBT+ young people are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide ideation and attempts (Russell and Fish, 2016). Research also indicates that transgender young people face higher levels of loneliness and isolation due to having less access to protective factors such as financial stability, a sense of community, and supportive social networks (Barnardo's London, 2020; Burstein et al., 2023). Overall, the mental health challenges faced by LGBT+ young people are increasingly significant, as they contribute to a higher risk of future difficulties in adulthood.

## 2.4 Life during the pandemic

As argued so far, LGBT+ young people were facing pressures before the pandemic. MacDonald and colleagues (2023, p. 9) aptly note that “pressure of the present build on top of pressures before and shape pressures to come”. This argument will be applied throughout this section, which will explore how the pandemic introduced new pressures and intensified existing inequalities in major

areas of LGBT+ young people’s lives. When facing a post-pandemic opportunity structure and how this interacts with youth transitions, it is important to consider how the cumulative impact of the past and present pressures shapes future outcomes.

### 2.4.1 Education

This study is researching LGBT+ young people aged 18-30, some of whom were still in sixth form or university when COVID restrictions were implemented in England. Therefore, this section will focus on these two educational settings. Tables 1 and 2 below provide an overview of the COVID restrictions relevant to sixth forms and universities, which will be referenced throughout this section.

**Table 1: Chronological order of COVID restrictions on sixth forms**

<b>Sixth form</b>	
<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>
March 2020	Sixth forms to close until further notice, lessons moved online.
June 2020	Sixth forms opened for Year 12 for some face-to-face/hybrid lessons.
June 2020	A-Level exams cancelled. Grades based on yearly assessments, mock exam results, and teacher predicted grades.
September 2020	Sixth forms opened for everyone.
January 2021	Sixth forms closed for the third national lockdown.
March 2021	Sixth forms returned to face-to-face teaching.
June 2021	A-Level exams cancelled; grades based on teachers’ grades from submitted work.
July 2021	Lifting of most legal limits on social distancing restrictions.
September 2021	Sixth forms open as normal
December 2021	Rise in omicron variant.
February 2022	Lifting of <i>all</i> legal social distancing restrictions.

**Table 2: Chronological order of COVID restrictions on universities**

<b>University</b>	
<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>
March 2020	University campuses told to close, teaching moved online, and students moved home.
September 2020	University teaching returned to face-to-face, but England had a national tier system at the time. Social events remained paused.
January 2021	Universities closed again, teaching returned online, and many universities decided the rest of the academic year would be online.
March 2021	University teaching returned to face-to-face, however most universities decided the rest of the academic year would remain online.
September 2021	Universities opened again; restrictions placed on social events.
December 2021	Rise in omicron variant.
February 2022	Lifting of <i>all</i> legal social distancing restrictions.

The policy changes demonstrated in the tables above show that being in sixth form and university during the pandemic was symbolised by constant change in relation to closures and re-openings, face-to-face teaching, and exams. This upheaval interrupted young people’s learning and deprived them of significant cultural milestones, such as end-of-term parties, proms, leaving for university, graduations and developing new friends. These milestones are crucial rites of passage in the transition to adulthood.

In 2020, A-level exams for sixth form students changed significantly and students did not sit their summer exams. Initially, A-level results were graded by the Ofqual exam results algorithm which produced grades that were negatively disproportionate to teachers’ predicted grades. Consequently, the Ofqual grades were withdrawn, and students were awarded Centre Assessment Grades based on their yearly assessments, mock exam results, and teachers’ predicted grades (The Health Foundation, 2020). This shift in grading was quite significant as the original grades had prevented some students from securing their desired university places. Students’ teacher assessed grades were higher in comparison and many students were able to attend their first-choice university option. This increase in admissions placed additional pressure on universities, leading some

universities to remove student caps and accept more students based on the revised grades (BBC News, 2020a). However, this put extra strain on their capacity, staff workload, and facilities. Therefore, some universities offered financial incentives to students to defer entry until 2021 (ibid.). Despite plans to return to normal A-level exams in September 2020, the decision was reversed in January 2021. Instead, A-level grades were again based on teacher-assessed work for that academic year. Following a second year of teacher-assessed results, England saw an increase in the number of students achieving higher grades (Coughlan et al., 2021).

With changes in relation to how A-level grades were conferred during the pandemic, England saw an unprecedented rise in the number of young people pursuing post-compulsory education (MacDonald et al., 2023; The British Academy, 2021; Youth Futures Foundation, 2021). Alongside this, the graduate labour market contracted significantly, with graduate recruitment dropping by 10.8% in 2020 compared to the previous year – the largest annual decrease in graduate vacancies since 2009 (High Fliers, 2020). For final year university students, the transition out of university became even more stressful and uncertain as many felt anxious about their futures amid declining graduate opportunities. Research by Timonen and colleagues (2021) found that students made downward adjustments in their expectations for careers post-university, often opting to avoid applying for graduate positions in favour of lower skilled jobs. Alternatively, some students chose to pursue postgraduate education to give them more time to let the economic impacts of the pandemic settle (Roberts, 2022). Consequently, young people faced critical decisions regarding their paths to financial independence, which could have long-term economic impacts. Bristow and Gilland (2020) have predicted that these economic inequalities will deepen further as these challenges persist in a post-pandemic society.

Overall, LGBT+ young people had to navigate big adjustments to their education. Studies have shown that young people felt the emotional strain resulting from constant changes to their education, adding to their levels of stress and anxiety

about what this would mean for their futures (MacDonald et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2021). This, and a lack of pedagogical support and social connections to make the most of their learning due to remote learning, increased mental health challenges (The Princes Trust, 2021). Students who still received strong emotional and practical support from their parents seemed to be protected from stress during the pandemic, affording them the opportunity to continue investing in their education (Erikson et al., 2024). Thus, the availability of resources influenced how young people experienced their education during the pandemic. While research has focused on more of the impacts of the pandemic for the objective transitions of moving into and out of university, there has been less exploration of how the changes in education have affected LGBT+ young people's meanings and perspectives regarding education. This can have significant implications for the process of completing university and embarking on the next process to financial independence. This research will address this gap by exploring how LGBT+ young people's narratives about education have changed or continued in a post-pandemic society, considering what this means for their transitions to adulthood.

#### 2.4.2 Employment

The pandemic's impact on employment created significant generational disparities. Young people have been disproportionately affected, with pre-existing inequalities being exacerbated or new ones created (Cohen, 2020). Table 3 below offers an overview of the various COVID-related employment policies and the changes they incurred. As shown, non-essential sectors such as retail, hospitality, catering and accommodation were impacted the most by COVID restrictions. Furthermore, LGBT+ young people make up a significant proportion in these sectors (Government Equalities Office, 2019) which raises serious questions about how the pandemic has impacted on their already precarious employment status.

**Table 3: Chronological order of COVID restrictions on employment**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>
February 2020	Everyone told to work from home, if they can.
March 2020	Non-essential retail, entertainment, indoor leisure, hospitality to close until further notice.
March 2020	Introduction of Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough), the government paid 80% of an individual’s wage if they could not work from home or their place of work had closed.
July 2020	Non-essential sectors opened to the public.
October 2020	The tier system was introduced, non-essential sectors had to close if their region was placed in Tier 2/3.
September 2020	Furlough reduced to pay 70% of an individual’s wage.
October 2020	Furlough reduced to pay 60% of an individual’s wage.
November 2020	Non-essential retail closed for the second national lockdown.
December 2020	Non-essential retail opened again.
January 2021	Non-essential retail closed for the third national lockdown.
April-July 2021	Non-essential retail gradually reopens.
September 2021	Furlough ended.
December 2021	Rise in omicron variant.
February 2022	Lifting of <i>all</i> social distancing restrictions.

During the lockdowns, young people were more likely to be placed on furlough as the retail and hospitality sectors closed. Conversely, many faced unemployment due to the economic impact of the pandemic on these sectors, which led to mass redundancies. Statistical findings from The Prince’s Trust (2021) demonstrate that in July 2020, 28% of 16–24-year-olds were placed on furlough compared to 18% of 25–34-year-olds. This is significant, as young people working in these sectors are often paid minimum wage. Thus, being placed on furlough reduced their income, further complicating their ability to achieve financial independence and navigate other youth transitions. Furthermore, youth unemployment increased by 15% between November 2020 and January 2021 compared to the same period the previous year (Centrepoin, 2021). This increase is significant as young people experienced extended periods of unemployment during the pandemic as finding a new job became more challenging and competitive (Resolution Foundation, 2022). A report by the Resolution Foundation (2022) suggested that the long-term economic impacts for young people may not be as bad as had been expected; by early Autumn 2021, the unemployment rate for those aged 18-24 had fallen below pre-pandemic levels, partially due to

economic recovery and unprecedented job vacancies. Despite the decline in unemployment, individuals who have secured employment have returned to insecure employment contracts, such as zero-hour, part-time, and temporary positions (ibid.). Thus, young people have switched from one precarious state to another. Long-term unemployment can have lasting ‘scarring’ effects, negatively affecting future job prospects, financial earnings, and mental health (Major et al., 2020; Moen et al., 2020; Youth Futures Foundation, 2022). This research will uncover whether and how the pandemic has economically scarred the financial independence of LGBT+ young people and explore the long-term implications on other areas of their lives.

The economic impacts of the pandemic also affected the values that young people place on employment. Research by Cook and colleagues (2024) on young people in Australia discovered that the pandemic exposed how precarious and vulnerable to wider economic changes their jobs are. However, they were unable to make plans for working in alternative sectors as they had limited access to resources to do so. This has also been confirmed by MacDonald and colleagues’ (2023) research on young people in England that found the impacts of the pandemic struck a fear in some young people that working in less than desirable jobs would be their long-term employment. Even for young people who were little affected in an immediate material sense experienced the pandemic as a critical moment for re-evaluating and amending their future employment plans (Cook et al., 2024; Rasmussen et al., 2023). However, Cook et al. (2024) argue that economically unaffected youth were able to strategically take time to plan for the future, suggesting a structural difference in response. These studies interestingly demonstrate that young people began to question the values and investments they make in their work, presenting a disjunction between their current situations and their desired futures. Building on these findings, this research aims to evaluate whether LGBT+ young people experienced similar challenges, how they navigated these realisations in a post-pandemic society, and how that has affected their sense of becoming an adult.

### 2.4.3 Living situation and family

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated many of the deep housing problems in the UK, especially in relation to a lack of security and stability across much of the private rented sector (Centrepoin, 2020). As outlined in the employment section, youth employment was significantly affected, likely forcing many young people to move back in with their families due to being unable to pay rent (Centrepoin, 2020; Timonen et al., 2021). Similarly, with university campuses closing, many universities told their students to return home. Research has found that by having to move back home, it thrust young people into a position of instability and feeling in-between life stages (Jamison and Kanter, 2023). It was often experienced as a regression to a younger life stage and an unwelcome step back in time (Vehkalahti et al., 2021). With the unknown threat of the virus, Jamison and Kanter (2023) found that young people felt a heightened sense of responsibility for the safety of those around them, leading to a curtailment of their own need for social interactions and romantic explorations.

For LGBT+ young people, some may have faced extra stressors in relation to their safety if they had to isolate with people who were discriminatory or abusive toward their identity (Clarke and Carter, 2023; Grant et al., 2021). One study focusing on transgender young people found that those living in unsupportive homes often felt uncomfortable with their gender expressions, reverting to presenting as the gender they did not identify with (Hudson et al., 2021). This reversion contributed to worsening mental health issues and increased gender dysphoria (ibid.). Similarly, some LGBT+ young people felt suffocated by not being able to talk openly about their identity with family members, or had to conceal their identity entirely (LGBT Foundation, 2020; Salerno et al., 2020). For LGBT+ young people who had to completely conceal their identity at home, this affected how they reached out for support. They felt unable to have verbal conversations with their friends for fear of outing themselves and putting their safety at risk (Salerno et al., 2020). As will be discussed in Chapter 3, social interactions are important for LGBT+ identity exploration, which plays a significant role in the

transition to adulthood. However, less attention has been given in the literature to how identity exploration was impacted by a change in living situation. This research will address this gap, examining the long-term implications for LGBT+ youth as they navigate their path to adulthood.

#### 2.4.4 Interpersonal spheres

For many LGBT+ young people, the pandemic forced them to reorganise their everyday lives and social relations, resulting in them not being able to interact with their friends in the same way. Youth transitions is a time in life whereby young people have more autonomy over how and with whom a person spends their time with, which is crucial for the development of social skills (Millet et al., 2023). Research indicates that missing out on in-person interactions with (LGBT+) friends was felt as a widespread loss; not being able to socialise and attend cultural events was seen as a missed opportunity for collective socio-emotional growth among friends (Craciun, 2024) and resulted in feelings of significant isolation (Houghton and Tasker, 2020; Hudson, 2021). Godwin (2021) found that their participants were worried about reconnecting with their friends in a post-pandemic society, fearing that they had changed and lost that connection with one another. Studies have uncovered that the change in interactions has impacted the quality of friendships and the development of social skills. Some found that they lost friendships as they struggled to keep up with interactions (Timonen et al., 2021) while others found that the experience resulted in better judgement concerning whom to have as friends (Craciun, 2024). The lack of ability to socialise in pre-pandemic ways was also seen as a hindrance to developing social skills. While many moved their interactions to online, the lack of a physical presence made sustaining connections more challenging. These studies point to a prediction that friendships among LGBT+ young people have become more distant. This research will longitudinally explore this and understand what implications this has had on their youth transitions.

The pandemic created, exposed and exacerbated inequalities and differences around access to communities. Opportunities for engaging in physical communities diminished as university campuses closed and community events, such as Pride, were postponed, cancelled, or moved to online formats. Physical LGBT+ spaces and support groups closed during the two years of COVID restrictions (Fish et al., 2020; LGBT Hero, 2021; The British Academy, 2021). Woodrow and Moore (2021) argue that some young people were better placed than others to navigate the loss of community, with LGBT+ young people being disproportionately affected which impacted their sense of identity, connections, and their transitions to adulthood. These challenges may have been exacerbated for rural LGBT+ young people as they were further prevented from travelling to spaces where physical communities can be accessed (Marlin et al., 2023). Although many LGBT+ young people turned to online communities during the pandemic to maintain a sense of belonging, paradoxically it made some feel lonelier due to the lack of physical presence and sense that connections were superficial (Grant et al., 2021). Some also encountered online discrimination towards their identity (Hudson, 2021). Rasmussen and colleagues (2023) found that the significant impact of the pandemic on community engagement and leisure led individuals to reevaluate their post-pandemic priorities, fostering a greater intentionality about spending time in physical communities. For LGBT+ young people, the pandemic resulted in a renewed importance being attached to physical LGBT+ spaces, with many looking forward to being able to attend Pride events and support groups again (Anderson and Knee, 2020; LGBT Hero, 2021). However, there are serious concerns that these physical spaces may be lost due to the economic impacts of the pandemic, resulting in a loss of the benefits that these places provide (Woodrow and Moore, 2021).

The pandemic also affected romantic relationships in terms of how they were pursued or how the dynamics between partners changed. The pandemic limited opportunities for in-person relationships, and social media became crucial for meeting sexual and romantic needs. However, platform regulations restricted the extent of sexual explorations (Garwood-Cross et al., 2023; Kara et al., 2023),

potentially creating a disconnect between developmental expectations and reality. Furthermore, relationships unfolded unusually under constrained circumstances, likely altering individuals' experiences of relationships. Research by Setty and Dobson (2023) found that some young people moved in with partners sooner than planned, which conflicted with their expectations for how they wanted their relationship to develop. Relationships also formed an important source of social support but resulted in an over-dependency on partners as opportunities to reach out to friends were hindered (ibid.) Furthermore, incidents of domestic violence increased among LGBT+ couples, however individuals felt there was limited opportunities to access specific support (McGowan et al., 2021). The pandemic constrained LGBT+ young people's agency and autonomy in their relationships, limiting their opportunities for experiences that are typically part of adulthood. This may influence how they approach future relationships in a post-pandemic society.

Scott and colleagues (2023) urge that long-term research is needed that focuses on the impacts of the pandemic on young people's social, emotional, and cultural lives. Such research is essential for shaping post-pandemic recovery and mitigating negative effects should we experience a global crisis on this scale again (Scott et al., 2023). This research seeks to address these concerns while also exploring the implications for LGBT+ youth as they transition to adulthood.

#### 2.4.5 Identity

Research has shown that the pandemic significantly impacted identity development for LGBT+ young people, with experiences varying based on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors (Fish et al., 2020). At an intrapersonal level, being separated from wider cis-heteronormative structures and discriminatory people provided some with an opportunity to think and explore their identities, leading to new insights about their gender and/or sexual identity (Clarke and Carter, 2023; Fish et al., 2020; Switchboard, 2021). While some valued being able to learn more about themselves, others found it

burdensome due to limited opportunities to act on this new information. Alternatively, for some individuals, their identity development was hindered as they had to limit the expression of their identity or conceal themselves completely (Hudson et al., 2021; LGBT Hero, 2021). This limitation was influenced by how the pandemic resulted in changes at an interpersonal level. Some LGBT+ young people found themselves stuck in their childhood home with unsupportive parents, feeling the absence of safe spaces and support networks (Fish et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2021). This restricted their ability to express themselves and engage with others. These additional stressors can severely affect how comfortable LGBT+ young people feel with their identity and can negatively impact their self-perception, particularly depending on their exposure to discriminatory attitudes (Kelleher, 2009; Meyer, 1995, 2003).

It was well-known that the NHS was overburdened by COVID-19 patients, with weekly headlines highlighting the immense strain it faced (Campbell and Duncan, 2021; Woodcock, 2021). To manage this, non-urgent healthcare services were scaled back, with transgender healthcare being further deprioritised (Banerjee and Nair, 2020). This has resulted in waiting-lists for gender-related care increasing exponentially as appointments have been delayed, cancelled, or postponed indefinitely, creating uncertainty regarding patients' status on these lists (Jowett, 2020; Phillips, 2021). As a result, some transgender young people have experienced a decline in their mental health and feelings of gender dysphoria have worsened (Hudson et al., 2021). Some feel they are unable to move on with their lives without having the necessary treatment they need to feel affirmed with their gender identity (ibid.). This raises significant questions on how this will interplay with their youth transitions, which this study will address.

As individuals reintegrate into a post-pandemic society with impacts on their gender and/or sexual identity, Clarke and Carter (2023) warn that these individuals may face additional challenges. For instance, navigating a cis-heteronormative society can complicate the process of affirming their new identities, increasing the risk of internalising negative societal attitudes (Meyer,

1995). Moreover, individuals may need more support connecting with communities and re-establishing affected connections, which are important for ongoing identity development (Clarke and Carter, 2023). For LGBT+ young people coming into a post-pandemic society with newly discovered identities, they may have new questions around what adulthood means to them. Alternatively, some may have been unable to develop their adult identities due to restrictions on self-expression. This research will explore how the pandemic has impacted identity development and how that is affecting the sense of being an adult.

#### 2.4.6 Mental health

The pandemic exacerbated negative mental health for many LGBT+ young people, especially for those who were already suffering from poor mental health pre-pandemic (LGBT Hero, 2021). A systematic review by McGowan and colleagues (2021) discovered that studies consistently found a decline in the mental health of LGBT+ young people during the pandemic, with these individuals reporting higher levels of distress compared to heterosexual and cisgender people. As has been argued throughout this section on the pandemic, LGBT+ young people faced considerable disruptions to their daily routines, experienced isolation from friends and family, encountered familial tensions, and dealt with anxieties about the virus and their futures (Dewa et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2020; Hoyt et al., 2021; Houghton and Tasker, 2021). Those who found themselves in the most precarious position from the pandemic financially, emotionally, and interpersonally were most particularly vulnerable to adverse mental health consequences (Brown et al., 2023). Moreover, Scott and colleagues (2023) also found that even young people with relatively stable mental health prior to the pandemic reported declines in their mental well-being. The persistent decline in mental health among LGBT+ young people pose significant challenges for re-integration into a post-pandemic society. Clarke and Carter (2023) found that negative mental health remains prevalent, with individuals struggling to access support and manage their mental health due to anxieties

about re-engaging in public life and reconnecting with communities. These challenges could have important implications for the process to becoming an adult in terms of how it might hinder future opportunities, a topic that remains underexplored in current research.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the social transformations occurring in England prior to the pandemic and their implications for the experiences of LGBT+ young people. It is evident that LGBT+ young people were already navigating the transition to adulthood within a context marked by increasing societal uncertainty, where changes in one area have knock-on effects in others. The aim of this chapter was to explore how the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities for LGBT+ youth while also creating new challenges. By developing a nuanced understanding of the contemporary conditions faced by LGBT+ young people in England, this chapter lays the groundwork for examining the relationship between broader social changes and transitions to adulthood, which will be further explored in the subsequent chapter.

# **Chapter 3 – LGBT+ young people’s transitions to adulthood**

## **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I review the theoretical and empirical literature on youth transitions and the challenges LGBT+ young people face in forming viable adult identities. Building on the discussion in Chapter 2, the chapter examines the extent to which neoliberal discourses of individualisation capture the 21<sup>st</sup> century experiences of LGBT+ young people as they navigate the transition to adulthood. In doing so, it foregrounds the interplay between agency and structural forces in shaping these experiences.

The chapter will begin with an analysis on what is involved in the transition to adulthood. It will start with a focus on individualisation, exploring how this now influences how LGBT+ young people approach their youth transitions. Following this, I critically engage with theoretical perspectives on adult identity construction, exploring the enduring societal expectations that shape the identities LGBT+ young people are encouraged to pursue. Subsequently, the chapter draws upon queer theory to explore the broader social constructions of sexuality and gender, and the way these constructions impose constraints on LGBT+ young people’s adult identity development. The chapter then engages with key theoretical frameworks, including concepts such as linked lives, critical moments, and biographical fields, to further elucidate the process of becoming an adult. The following section, ‘LGBT+ young people becoming an adult’, reviews existing empirical research, providing insight into what is already known for how LGBT+ young people approach constructing adult identities. In this section, I also engage with scholarly work that highlights the value of subcultural and peer network thinking as analytical concepts for understanding the complexities of LGBT+ young people’s lives. When taken together, research can generate sensitive and sophisticated accounts of youth experiences that can consider and highlight how personal agency, social structural constraints, critical moments,

linked lives, and youth culture intersect to shape the direction of individual youth transitions (MacDonald et al., 2001).

Through this analysis, I aim to position my research within the broad range of scholarly work that has been conducted in these areas by detailing how I am aligning myself with scholars who closely represent the theoretical viewpoint expressed in this thesis. Moreover, I seek to illustrate how this research addresses key gaps in existing literature, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the process shaping LGBT+ youth transitions to adulthood.

## 3.2 Transitions to adulthood

### 3.2.1 Individualisation

It has been argued in Chapter 2 that neoliberal ideas have become embedded in society's structure and institutions with the emphasis now on individual responsibility. Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) have theorised that these changes indicate that society has moved into a period of late modernity, where traditional rules and governance over individuals have weakened, and individualisation has taken centre focus. This shift means that wider social structures no longer have a strong hold on the choices individuals can make, allowing individuals to shape their identities from a wide range of possibilities. As a result, individuals are now working on 'self-projects', whereby everyone is striving towards creating a coherent self, and they are left to their own devices in making major life decisions and determining the directions their lives will take. Thus, society has transitioned from 'normal biographies' to 'choice biographies'.

This shift has affected how young people experience transitions to adulthood as they have become more variable and individualised (Shanahan, 2000). Almost every young person is now faced with making the decision on what they want their adulthoods to look like, playing an active role in imagining their futures and determining their own development (Coleman, 2011; Settersten, 2017;

Settersten and Thogmartin, 2018; Weeks et al., 2001). Wyn and Dwyer (1999) stress that research on youth transitions need to adapt to this change, emphasising that studies need to consider how today's youth define adulthood and the paths they choose to reach it. However, there has been very little focus on the applicability of individualisation frameworks to LGBT+ young people and how they approach and define what adulthood means to them. Addressing this gap is important, as authors such as Settersten and Mayer (1997) and Arnett (1997, 2000, 2004) argue that what constitutes the 'normal biography' has become less clear, with everything being presented as a possibility. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, choice is political and the choices one makes during a youth transition can significantly impact one's inclusion or exclusion from full citizenship rights. This research will address this gap by understanding what adulthood means to LGBT+ young people and assess whether there really has been a substantial decline in the structural regularity to youth transitions.

### 3.2.2 Constructing an adult identity

It has been alluded to that young people are actively constructing an adult identity and this forms a key part to becoming an adult. It is this theorising that the rest of this section, and thesis, will be based on. Identity theory posits that young people are self-reflexive and identify as adults based on the objective social roles they acquire in society (Andrew et al., 2006). Social roles refer to the set of expectations, behaviours and responsibilities associated with a particular position or status within society (ibid.). In relation to youth transitions, this involves taking on new roles in various domains such as employment, family, and independent living. Burke and Stets (2009) argue that young people attach personal meanings to particular social roles and social groups they want to be a part of and are active in self-selecting the social roles they want to acquire for their adulthood. When these roles become available and are taken up, they reinforce a young person's sense of identification as an adult and outwardly demonstrates their adult status to others.

There is a complex relationship between the subjective and objective side of developing an adult identity. Both perspectives should be considered when researching transitions to adulthood to develop a comprehensive understanding (Coleman, 2011; Heckhausen and Buchmann, 2019; Pustulka, 2022). There is broad agreement on what a subjective sense of adulthood feels like, with research suggesting it includes: independence (financial, residential, and self-reliance) (Andrew et al., 2006; Aronson, 2008; Arnett and Taber, 1994; Johnson et al., 2007; Morosanu et al., 2019); responsibility (individual and in a relational sense) (Andrew et al., 2006; Berg, 2007); maturity (Johnson et al., 2007); and having a stable identity (asserting opinions and oneself as an adult) (Arnett, 2000; Andrew et al., 2006). As such, occupying objective social roles is not enough for the achievement of adulthood, it must be coupled with a change in the subjective state of mind. Hartmann and Swartz (2007) further argue that, in some cases, a combination of objective roles such as employment and independent living need to be achieved for an individual to feel subjectively independent.

However, very few studies have examined the interrelation between the objective and subjective dimensions of becoming an adult. Both dimensions are best understood as being on opposite sides of a pendulum, with research often swinging heavily on one side and neglecting the other. This is best seen in Arnett's (1997, 2000, 2015) theory on 'emerging adulthood'. Instead of focusing on objective transitions, this theory embraces entirely the psychological orientation of adulthood. Arnett (2015) has even gone so far as to argue that becoming an adult is exclusively internal, and thus the theory rejects that traditional demographic markers such as finishing education, beginning full time work, leaving the family home are relevant to the attainment of an adult identity. Unsurprisingly, this theory has been heavily criticised on many different fronts. This includes the need for youth theory to be comprehensive by addressing the objective aspects of becoming an adult rather than solely focusing on the subjective (Bynner, 2005; Hendry and Kloep, 2010). Moreover, an exclusive emphasis on the subjective can create a 'dangerous myth' about young people, allowing policymakers to use this as a rationale for inaction in developing youth

policies that help individuals to attain objective social roles (Cote, 2014). Thus, this research will examine how both objective and subjective dimensions are involved in how LGBT+ young people develop their adult identity. In doing so, it will further support the argument that a comprehensive understanding of youth transitions requires consideration of both aspects.

As young people define what they want their adulthood to look like, they also develop a narrative that helps them make sense of their lives, understand who they are, how they wish to be perceived as they plan for the future and construct their identities (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Thomson et al., 2004; Woodiwiss, 2017). Thus, there are many different narratives that young people can develop for themselves (Anderson, 2001) and agency plays a crucial role in shaping the visions young people create for their future. Developing an adult identity, therefore, involves being able to keep a particular narrative going as a young person evolves and makes meaning out of their life.

As young people actively construct adult identities by selecting the social roles and developing personal narratives, Benson and Furstenberg (2006) argue that the narratives of adulthood and the significance placed on social roles can differ among various subgroups of young people. This was found in Yau et al.'s (2021) research exploring ethnic differences in becoming an adult. They found that White participants often viewed starting a family as a key marker of adulthood, whereas Black participants frequently emphasised caring for their family of origin and were more likely to nominate specific job goals to achieve financial independence.

However, Mortimer and Moen (2016) argue that emphasising the individualised nature of adulthood obscures its socially structured nature. Therefore, a balanced approach is needed in studying youth transitions that acknowledges the constraints imposed by socially structured opportunities and limitations (Shanahan, 2000). As such, while subgroups of young people may attach varying importance to different social roles, with this process they also develop a view of how they fit into the social world. This can create a mismatch between their self-perception and how others perceive them, leading to feelings of discomfort or

shame (Burke and Stets, 2009). Jenkins (1996, 2014) argues that with developing an adult identity there is a constant tension between sameness and difference. From this tension we get a sense of who we are, who others are, others knowing who we are, and us knowing the opinion of others on us. It is this sameness and difference that has developed from how age is a social construct (Mortimer and Moen, 2016). As individuals enter a new life stage, they encounter societal expectations and cultural norms regarding appropriate behaviour, the social roles to be achieved, and the timing of these transitions (Heckhausen, 2009; Kohli and Meyer, 1986; Neugarten et al., 1965). This social organisation shapes the opportunities and constraints individuals face, operating as prods and brakes on behaviours, with pervasive societal sanctions regulating these actions (Heckhausen and Buchmann, 2019). Youth transitions such as leaving education without qualifications, becoming a parent at a young age, or being unemployed are often sanctioned by society (Culatta and Clay-Warner, 2021).

Although the process of developing an adult identity is increasingly individualised, society still places expectations on what social roles young people should achieve to become adults (Liebig and Levy, 2015). These are well-known in mainstream discourse to be the 'big 5' markers of adulthood which are: (1) leaving school, (2) starting a full-time job, (3) leaving the parental home, (4) entering marriage, and (5) becoming a parent (Jaffe, 2018; Settersten and Ray, 2010). Generally, youth studies explore the transition between these five markers, such as the transition from education to employment, moving out of the family home into independent living, and forming monogamous romantic relationships and/or forming families (Kneale and French, 2018; Johnson et al., 2007). These societal expectations are internalised by members of society, and they act as references for young people to compare their youth transitions to, informing them if their trajectories are normative and on or off time (Heckhausen, 2009). If there is a difference between expectations and personal experiences, it can make for an extremely stressful youth transition (Culatta and Clay-Warner, 2021).

These social expectations also act as narrative frameworks and narrow down how far-ranging young people's narratives can be. As argued in Chapter 2, these social constructions of adulthood also need to be understood as responsibilities set by the state that young people are expected to uphold to receive citizen rights. Woodiwiss (2017) argues that while individuals may not simply slot themselves into the ready-made narrative, it does inform and delimit the narratives individuals can construct. Thus, we may interpret this dynamic in terms of epistemic injustice (Freeman, 2010), where certain knowledge and understandings are excluded or devalued, silencing individual meanings and contributions. Mendick and colleagues (2018) further explored how young people think about their futures by exploring how media representations can prop up dominant narratives about the self, success, failures, opportunity, and inequality. They found that such narratives operate through celebrity representations, and young people take information about celebrities as a social and cultural practice through which they can work and express ideas about themselves and others. Thus, depending on what representations young people have access to, it can regulate their aspirations and open up or shut down certain ways of thinking.

### 3.2.3 Que(e)rying adult identities

Queer theory explores and theorises about the social forces that define us all as sexual and gendered beings. It is about identifying, naming, understanding, and challenging the social forces and structures that marginalise and oppress the experiences of LGBT+ people. Thus, it is a useful theory for understanding the cis-heteronormative structures that prop up societal expectations of adulthood.

Queer theory challenges the essentialist assumption that sex, gender, and sexuality are naturally fixed to each other (Green, 2007). That is, an individual who is born as a biological male is assigned the male gender at birth and will naturally be heterosexual and attracted to the opposite gender, women. Against this essentialist conception of heterosexuality, queer theorists assert that sexuality is a social construct and there is not one naturally superior sexual orientation

(Epstein, 1994). Thus, individuals live in a society where they are surrounded by the social construction that heterosexuality is natural, innate, and is the purest form of sexual behaviour. Having a sexual orientation that is not heterosexual is a sign of biological abnormality and irregularity, is morally deviant, and medically pathological. Queer theorists assert that the various forms of discrimination and exclusion that LGBT+ people experience stem from these social constructions (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010).

Queer theory has progressed from understanding the social construction of sexuality to taking a poststructuralist perspective to understand how these social constructs permeate social and cultural organisations and are a part of wider societal structures (Seidman, 1994; Tilsen and Nylund, 2010; Epstein, 1994). Central to this perspective is Foucault's (1980) argument on regulative discourses, which function as forms of knowledge and ideas that serve as a form of social control. Queer theorists argue that discourses and language naturalise and normalise heterosexuality, and they serve as a form of social control over people's sexual identities (Namaste, 1994). These discourses are prevalent in the wider social structure, in the various institutions an individual is part of, and they are embedded in our social relations. Chapter 2 explored how such discourses shape societal expectations of citizenship and adulthood. Thus, queer theory offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding the heterosexual discourse that LGBT+ young people are surrounded by while undergoing their youth transitions, and how this can impact how they approach developing and defining their adult identities.

Transgender studies are a newly emerging sociological field of work that encompasses the unique experiences of transgender people (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). Influenced by queer theory and its poststructuralist approach, this theoretical field of work challenges cisnormative and essentialist assumptions regarding the relationship between sex and gender (Butler, 1990; Seidman, 1994). That is, a baby born biologically male will grow up to identify and act as a man, or a baby born as a biological female will grow up to identify and act as a woman. Drawing on Butler's (1990, 2006) gender theory, transgender studies argue that

the relationship between sex and gender is not natural, nor is it fixed, and is thus open to questioning, re-inventing, re-making, and self-constructing (Butler, 1990, 2006; Halperin, 1995; Shotwell and Sangry, 2009). Therefore, the transgender body represents a very different set of assumptions about gender by embodying gender flexibility (Halberstam, 2005). Transgender identities are diverse, encompassing multiple variations in gender identity, expression, and embodiment, which may not necessarily be interconnected. For instance, Hines (2006) study on thirty transgender men and women found that one's self-identified gender identity can shift throughout a person's life course and can be open to continuous re-making and re-inventing. Participants in Hines' (2006) study had markedly different approaches to how they developed their gender identity, with some just altering their gender expression while others pursued both expression and embodiment changes. Roen (2002) further theorises that gender identity needs to also be understood as 'both/neither'. That is, a person's gender identity may fall outside the traditional gender binary or exist in-between it, allowing for a more fluid understanding of gender.

Transgender studies seek to challenge cisnormative social constructions of gender to accommodate the multiplicity of gender identities. This field also considers how these constructions impact the lived experiences of transgender people. Reshaping or reinventing a gender identity that differs from the one assigned at birth often carries social consequences (Roen, 2002). The social environment essentialises social identity, pressuring individuals to conform to gender identity categories and repeatedly perform their gender accordingly (Butler, 1990, 2006). Consequently, gender is understood and practiced within various social, cultural, political, temporal and embodied contexts. Transgender individuals are connected to these cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity, and are seen to break traditional gender expectations (Kondelin, 2014). As Halberstam (2011, p. 3) aptly states, "Failing is something transgender bodies do and have always done exceptionally well". Those who disrupt the connection between sex and gender, or challenge a binary understanding of gender, may face societal stigma (McLean, 2021). Roen (2002, p. 501)

characterises this dilemma with the question, “To pass, or not to pass?”. To be socially accepted as the gender they self-identify with and avoid feelings of gender dysphoria, many individuals change their gender expressions and embodied aspects to conform to gendered expectations. However, for those that do not assimilate themselves into these expectations, the ability to self-construct one’s gender identity can be hindered by wider structures (Nagoshi and Bruzy, 2010). Westbrook and Schilt (2014) note that some transgender people may receive validation when their gendered expressions do not question a cisgender, binary framework of gender. However, for those that do not their gender identity may continue to be questioned and invalidated. The previous chapter explored how societal pressure to conform to a cisgender binary identity intersect with citizenship rights, leading to the exclusion of some transgender individuals.

For LGBT+ young people, state interventions place pressure on them to assimilate themselves to cis-heteronormative standards to be recognised as full citizens. These societal expectations of adulthood discard the diverse experiences of LGBT+ young people, limiting their access to the resources necessary to shape their own adult identities (Liebig and Levy, 2015). Beyond the state’s role in enforcing cis-heteronormative conceptions of adulthood, social institutions also reproduce hegemonic temporalities (Heckhausen and Krueger, 1993). For instance, studies have shown that schools can act as sites of social control over one’s sexuality and/or gender identity (Donovan et al., 2023) and family members from older generations are likely to reinforce traditional expectations of adulthood onto younger members (Heckhausen and Buchmann, 2019). This extensive social regulation of youth transitions makes it more difficult for individuals to follow non-normative transitions (Liebig and Levy, 2015).

However, very few studies have explored how LGBT+ young people approach and define their adult identity, and what resources they can access to help with this, with most existing studies being US-based. This gap in research is significant, as it leaves important questions unanswered regarding how dominant norms influence LGBT+ young people’s perception of adulthood and the extent to which

they may even perceive the ability to obtain adulthood (Torkelson, 2012; Valkenburg, 2022). This research will address this gap by focusing on how LGBT+ young people approach defining adulthood and how they experience it in relation to the formal markers of adulthood and citizenship rights.

### 3.2.4 Becoming an adult

In line with the emphasis on individualisation, young people are encouraged to determine *how* they want to work towards developing their adult identities (Kohli and Meyer, 1986; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Wyn and Dwyer, 1999). In Andrew and colleagues' (2006) research, young people often used the phrases 'your own', 'it's all you', 'you're pretty much alone' when talking about their perceptions of youth transitions, emphasising the weight being placed on individual agency. Young people actively choose which institutional involvements and interpersonal relationships align with their individual goals, values, and strengths (Shanahan, 2000; Yau et al., 2021). This perspective of individualisation underpins Arnett's theory of 'emerging adulthood', which posits that individuals defining their adult identity undergo a period of experimentation, exploring various employment, living arrangements, educational opportunities, and relationships (Arnett, 2000, 2007, 2014). Different paths remain possible and young people are at the helm in making these decisions. Thus, Arnett's (2007) theory is cast almost exclusively in terms of individual, voluntary agency.

Arnett's theory has been criticised for heavily exaggerating how much agency young people have and for understating how experiences continue to be constrained by wider social structures (Bynner, 2005). Hendry and Kloep (2010) argue that Arnett's theory is largely based on Western, middle-class experiences, and may not adequately represent young people who cannot take advantage of the range of opportunities now available (Cote and Bynner, 2008; Cote, 2014). While youth studies should acknowledge the agency young people may exercise, this is just one feature to gaining a comprehensive and sensitive understanding of youth transitions. Wider social structures continue to reproduce inequalities

(Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Pollock, 1997; Roberts et al., 1994), and these factors also need to be considered. Nevertheless, Arnett's theory has mostly been criticised through a social class lens and this research will also assess whether similar criticisms can also be applied through gender and sexuality lenses, further questioning whether it is, at all, a relevant theory for understanding youth transitions. This is important to consider as cis-heteronormative structures discourage deviation away from standards of 'proper' adulthood (Kneale and French, 2018; Taylor, 2010a; Torkelson, 2012). For LGBT+ young people, strong agency is required of them to construct adult identities beyond what is expected of them, but to also decide *how* they are going to achieve them (Heckhausen and Buchmann, 2019). This challenges Arnett's argument that agency is voluntary, suggesting instead that for LGBT+ young people, agency can often be involuntary or forced.

The experience of becoming an adult for LGBT+ young people might result in different strategies of dealing with this discrepancy between expectations and personal experiences. It could be that they seek inclusion and 'ordinariness' (Coleman-Fountain, 2017; Needham, 2012; Settersten and Thogmartin, 2018). Evans (2002) concept of 'bounded agency' is useful here for thinking about how these wider structures can lead to a social inequality of aspirations for LGBT+ young people and their adult identities. Bounded agency was developed as a concept from empirical findings that highlighted that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds framed their adult narrative around exerting individual effort to improve their future life chances. However, wider social structures and receiving a lack of recognition and support from other members of their social class limited the extent to which they could exercise this agency, and their narratives were gradually re-written towards having to be realistic in their individual goals and aspirations. Henderson and colleagues (2007) also sought to explore this in their key research *Inventing Adulthoods*, to investigate how much young people take control of their lives and how the social and material environments young people grow up in act to shape the values and identities they adopt. They theorised this through the formula of *competencies*

and *investments*, suggesting that certain adult identities are invested in when recognised by others and this develops a sense of competency from doing something well. However, if young people do not receive the recognition for the adult identities they wish to invest in, their individual narratives may shift toward investing in conventional adult identities that are likely to be acknowledged (Kogler et al., 2024). Consequently, they may be less inclined to aspire to alternative adult identities, resulting in social inequality in aspirations. This tendency can lead these young people to conform to a default individualisation orientation (Cote and Swartz, 2002). McPherson's (2024) application of Fisher's (2012 in McPherson, 2024) concept 'hauntology' further illuminates how the pursuit of adult identities can affect self-perception. Hauntology explores the interplay between past, present, and future, emphasising how adjustments to self-projects are influenced by past experiences. It posits that the past lingers in the present, creating a sense of nostalgia or loss and often trapping individuals in their histories, hindering their ability to move forward. This concept encourages reflection on how our past experiences shape our current realities and future aspirations (McPherson, 2024).

The above discussion prompts critical questions about theories of individualisation in relation to youth transitions, including which young people are best positioned to pursue self-projects and whether structural conditions have genuinely declined in influence or just evolved in new ways (Woodman and Wyn, 2016). However, as MacDonald (2011) aptly points out, youth transitions research has been over-occupied with the problems faced by young people in the lower social classes, leaving gaps in understanding other subgroups. This research will place gender and sexuality at the centre to explore if, and how, LGBT+ young people might experience social inequalities in aspirations and how the pandemic might have impacted that.

Alternative to readjusting expectations for adulthood, LGBT+ young people might reclaim the uniqueness of their subjectivities and pursue their self-defined adult identities (Young et al. 2014). A key component to this is accessing identity capital, which includes using social relationships and material and cultural

resources to empower individuals to pursue adult identities that challenge societal norms. This suggests that various contexts can influence LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood, helping them develop their visions for adulthood (Wagaman et al., 2016), with engagement in LGBT+ communities playing a significant role. However, identifying these contexts has received little attention, which this study will address. This aligns with MacDonald et al.'s (2001) call for a broad conception of youth transitions exploring how personal agency, structure, and culture operate together to shape the direction of youth transitions. It is in the following section 'LGBT+ young people becoming adults' where the importance of subculture will be explored further.

To understand how young people develop a sense of competency and invest in specific adult identities, there needs to be a consideration of a young person's social location and the different biographical fields that are in play (Henderson et al., 2007). Biographical fields are dynamic and overlapping and can impact one's sense of adulthood. For instance, developing a sense of independence is associated with the biographical fields of employment and living situation. Furthermore, depending on the social location of a young person, biographical fields provide different types of social, material, and cultural resources which affect how adult identities are accessed, affirmed or disaffirmed, developed and constructed (Henderson et al., 2007; Thomson et al., 2004). The concept of linked lives is important here – who we become, the opportunities we are given or denied, the decisions and actions we take, the meanings we derive, are all interconnected with our social relationships (Elder, 1994; Settersten, 2015, 2017). These social relationships can include peers, family, professionals, and institutions, each characterised by varying degrees of connection, quality, duration, content, and impact (Settersten, 2023).

Social relationships can have both positive and negative effects on individual development. Adult identities can be contested or sanctioned by others, or relationships can be absent, neglectful or abusive and can undermine the sense of competency needed to pursue certain identities (Gilligan and Brady, 2023). Alternatively, connections may give individuals the courage to envision

transitions that they might otherwise push aside (Settersten and Thogmartin, 2018). As a result, individuals may seek to connect with others who share similar goals or experiences (Heckhausen and Buchmann, 2019). Here, friendships can be vital sources of social support throughout a person's life (Volker, 2022). However, depending on a young person's location within certain biographical fields, they might be prevented from being able to access these networks, or it sets the conditions on the kinds of people individuals encounter and form relationships with (Settersten, 2015). Furthermore, social relationships are not always stable, they can change over time. It is important to consider 'unlinked lives' in this context, particularly how relationships can be lost, when this occurs, and the subsequent consequences (Marsden, 2024; Settersten et al., 2023).

The process of becoming an adult often involves significant changes in a young person's social life and sense of self, with both positive and negative impacts. Changes can occur within various biographical fields and can affect the balance between sense of competency and investment into adult identities (Lanctot and Poulin, 2024; Thomson et al., 2004). Here, the consideration of critical moments: what they are, when they occur, and how they are responded to, is important for understanding the process to becoming an adult. Critical moments are significant events or experiences that can shape decisions, identity, relationships, and future paths (Settersten and Mayer, 1997). Critical moments can occur along multiple dimensions: major vs. minor, anticipated vs. unanticipated, controllable vs. uncontrollable, typical vs. atypical, positive vs. negative, acute vs. chronic (Levy and Buhmann, 2016; Settersten and Mayer, 1997). Therefore, researchers are encouraged to take an open approach to identifying and understanding these events. Young people often have specific ideas about the critical moments they wish to experience that will support their investment in adult identities. For example, Lanctot and Poulin (2024) found that many young people aim to move out of their family home by their mid-20's.

The impact of a critical moment is contingent upon its timing and the individual's life context (Elder, 1994; Shanahan et al., 2005). Critical moments may be problematic if simultaneous events occur, overwhelming individuals with too

many changes or resulting in a misalignment between social recognition and investment (Coleman, 2011; Lanctot and Poulin, 2024). Conversely, if very few moments occur it can result in feelings of disconnection and hinder investment in adult identities (Lanctot and Poulin, 2024). Thus, there needs to be an even balance of critical moments during youth transitions.

In addition to identifying critical moments, youth research also needs to understand why they occur and how individuals respond. It is important to consider the resources people use to respond, or cope, with these events and how critical moments carry with them a great deal of continuity and change (Settersten and Mayer, 1997; Settersten and Thogmartin, 2018; Thomson et al., 2004; Wood, 2017). Thomson and colleagues' (2002) work on mapping critical moments along a fate-choice continuum provides a valuable framework for analysing the interplay between structure and agency in shaping both the occurrence of and responses to critical moments. On the 'choice' side, it engages with Giddens (1991) work on 'fateful' moments. That is, individuals have control of the critical moments taking place, leading to crossroads that may reveal new, potentially life-altering insights about themselves. In response to fateful moments, individuals take control and exercise agency whereby they consider the consequences of choices and actions, engage in an assessment of risk, undertake identity work, draw on 'expert systems' to seek advice, undertake research, and develop new skills. Thus, the individual applies rational choice-making agency and is engaged in a reflexive project of self throughout their response. In contrast, on the 'fate' side of Thomson et al.'s (2002) continuum, a 'fatalistic' moment occurs beyond the individual's control and is shaped by broader social circumstances and structures. Responses to these moments can be shaped by wider economic, social, and cultural resources individuals have and the structures they find themselves in. Thus, Thomson et al.'s (2002) continuum focuses on the differing degrees of agency and the limitations imposed by social structures, revealing insights into social inequality.

Thomson and Holland (2009) distinguish between critical moments and turning points. While critical moments capture how individuals respond to specific

events, turning points provide a longitudinal view of their lasting impacts on life. Critical moments represent one part of the narrative, whereas a moment constitutes a turning point involves examining how it has been revisited, worked, and reworked in the ongoing biographical narrative (Denzin, 1989).

### 3.2.5 Complexity of youth transitions

This research will also apply the theoretical argument made by the life course theory that lives are inscribed in a place, a context, and historical period (Elder, 1994; Giele and Elder, 1998). As Settersten (2017) aptly puts it:

“History leaves its footprints on ageing” (p. 1)

Historical events can take the form of a cohort effect, and impacts are likely to be most significant during youth transitions when a young person is going through critical life conditions and changes (Heckhausen, 2009). Furthermore, individual identities such as gender, sexuality, social class, ethnicity can further reinforce marginalisation at times of historical change and this needs to be considered to capture a nuanced insight into the impact of these events.

As outlined in Chapter 2, society has undergone a massive political shift to neoliberalism, which has affected state policies and the institutions that represent significant biographical fields for youth transitions such as education, employment, and living situation. Consequently, youth transitions have undergone significant reconfigurations and the predictability of trajectories young people take have been radically altered (Alwin, 2012; Cohler and Michaels, 2013; France, 2016). Youth transitions have become non-standardised and less predictable (Badolato, 2023; Thomson et al., 2002), they are increasingly non-linear (Furlong, 2017), and have become extended (Pollock, 1997; King, 2015). Young people are now likely to have prolonged educational careers, labour market difficulties, difficulties accessing affordable housing, mental health is a big concern, and some may struggle to maintain supportive relationships with family and peers.

The interplay between lives and times constitutes a fundamental theoretical anchor in this research, exploring how the pandemic might be continuing to be a significant historical event for LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood. This means that, methodologically, studies on youth transitions need to be able to account for the variable and non-linear nature of transitions especially at the subjective level of experience (MacDonald et al., 2001; Settersten and Mayer, 1997). This has influenced the methodological approach taken for this research with a qualitative longitudinal approach being applied to understand how youth transitions change *through* time and will be outlined in more detail in Chapter 4.

### 3.3 LGBT+ young people becoming adults

This section engages with the very few studies that have empirically uncovered what adulthood means for LGBT+ young people. It will demonstrate that developing an adult identity is an ongoing process.

#### 3.3.1 Independence

Developing independence involves movement between three major biographical fields: education, employment, and living situation. Independence involves both financial independence and living independently (away from the family home) (Aronson, 2008; Wagaman et al., 2016).

##### *Education*

Moving out of the family home to attend university has become a common experience for many young people today. For many students, this often marks the first time away from home, providing an important opportunity to develop independence and responsibility (Henderson et al., 2007). Furthermore, it can also be a significant moment for LGBT+ young people to explore and express their identity/s without the constraints of parental oversight (Ellis, 2009). According to Formby (2015), LGBT+ young people often choose universities based on factors

such as LGBT+ visibility in the area, inclusive accommodation for transgender students, and a location far enough from home to foster personal growth. University life introduces new social possibilities, allowing students to connect with a broader range of individuals and communities (Fu, 2023), engage in diverse leisure activities (Aronson, 2008), and pursue sexual and/or romantic relationships (Bogle, 2008). Thus, university can be crucial for the development of adult identities.

Education also provides credentials and helps with the process to full-time work. Fu (2023) proposes the concept of a double helix to describe the interconnectedness of education and work, emphasising how each supports personal growth and recognition. Education helps young people develop work values and future career plans, while employment offers opportunities to develop skills, thus facilitating career progression.

### *Employment*

Employment offers financial independence, which in turn opens doors to greater autonomy and mobility. Financial independence provides young people with a sense of responsibility and choice, as managing personal finances fosters maturity and independence (MacDonald et al., 2001). Studies consistently show that stable employment is a key component to developing adult identities, offering a sense of security, social inclusion, and personal growth (Heckhausen and Buchman, 2019; Heglum and Nilsen, 2024; MacDonald et al., 2001; Thomson et al., 2004). Secure jobs help young people build confidence, acquire skills, and connect to broader goals and purposes (MacDonald et al., 2001; Heglum and Nilsen, 2024; Furlong, 2017). In contrast, unemployment is associated with negative outcomes such as social exclusion, boredom, and loss of identity (Furlong et al., 2018).

Work also involves engaging with meaningful activities. It has been suggested that individuals tend to pursue careers in fields where they feel competent and fulfilled, seeking jobs that align with their aspirations for a good life (Jackson, 1995). Research, such as that by Bergan-Gander and von Kurthy (2006) and

Cohler and Michaels (2013), shows that LGBT+ individuals often prefer workplaces where their identity is accepted and have appropriate measures in place to address workplace discrimination. However, both these studies are outdated and focus less on the experiences of LGBT+ young people. This research will update those findings and examine how today's LGBT+ young people develop work values as part of their adult identity formation.

### *Living situation*

Independent living allows for young people to develop a sense of independence from the family (Shanahan et al., 2005). It also brings a sense of self-sufficiency, competency, and maturity as young people must manage and financially sustain their own independent living (Thomson et al., 2004). For LGBT+ young people, independent living can be even more necessary depending on how supportive their families are and for working on identity development (Scroggs and Venum, 2021). For those who feel unsafe or uncomfortable in their family home, independent living is essential for their wellbeing (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2017). Even if they come from supportive families, independent living is important for identity development, providing the freedom to explore new ways of living and engaging with relationships (Scroggs and Venum, 2021). For some, they may seek to move to urban areas where they can connect with LGBT+ communities and develop friendships (Ueno et al., 2014).

Housing within youth studies is typically explored through the lens of the socioeconomic factors and challenges young people face in their transition to independent living (Hoff, 2023). However, less attention has been given to whether LGBT+ young people prioritise certain types of independent living over others. In the following section, I will explore how friendships and romantic relationships are equally important for LGBT+ young people and their adult identities. This prompts further questions about how these factors influence LGBT+ young people's approach to independent living. This research will address whether a more comprehensive perspective is required for understanding the living situations of LGBT+ young people.

### 3.3.2 Communities

As mentioned in the 'Becoming an adult' section, LGBT+ young people might reclaim the uniqueness of their self-identified adult identities by accessing social and cultural resources. It is through engaging with (LGBT+) communities that these resources can be accessed. Subcultural theory is useful here to elucidate why communities might play an important role for LGBT+ youth transitions in the provision of social and cultural resources. Nancy Macdonald, in her study on graffiti artists in London and New York, offers a useful definition of subculture:

“A subculture may be defined as that which constructs, perceives and portrays itself as standing apart from others as an isolated, defined and bounded group”. (2001, p. 152)

Subcultures are focused on certain activities, values, and territorial spaces that bring individuals together with a shared lived experience. Thus, the above quote indicates that subcultures must be analysed in relation to the dominant culture to understand how and why individuals are held together in subcultural groups. Subcultural theory also emphasises that engagement is intentional and requires reflexive strategies to grapple with personal and collective challenges (Clarke et al., 1976; Haenfler, 2014). MacDonald and Shildrick's (2007) adaptation of the notion 'leisure career' is useful for understanding how engagement in subcultural practices occur alongside youth transitions, providing important developmental resources. Drawing upon qualitative research with 'socially excluded' young people in the North East of England, they found that young people shared experiences of socially structured opportunities and constraints. Engaging in subcultures helped the young people to create shared paths of transitions whereby their identities were affirmed, reworked, and invested in. However, subcultural theory has predominantly been applied to white, male, working class youth, with little understood about how subcultures can also emerge among different groups with different identities.

Halberstam's (2003, 2005) theory on 'queer subculture' offers a useful starting point for reshaping our understanding of subcultures in several important ways. This theory argues that through queer use of time and space, cultures develop in opposition to cis-heteronormative structures. This creates opportunities for individuals to depart from a normative model of youth transitions, offering alternative temporalities that allow them to map out different forms of adulthood. Flexibility is a core component to these cultures, offering new perspectives on the life course, gender, and sexuality. This flexibility allows LGBT+ young people's futures to be imagined and identities to be affirmed and recognised (Stone, 2013; Taylor, 2010a). This affirmation and recognition can occur through intergenerational connection. Older members can be an important developmental resource for younger members through offering real-life examples of alternative futures, thus suggesting that there is an egalitarian generational structure in these spaces (Westrate et al., 2024). Nevertheless, very little research has continued to consider how subcultures emerge among different identity-based groups (Hodkinson, 2016). Instead, there has been a shift to a second wave of youth cultural studies, with the emergence of a post-subcultural theoretical perspective (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003), which tends to downplay the importance of social structural influences on youth culture. This research will respond to Hodkinson's (2016) call for a continued consideration of subcultures by elucidating how engaging in queer subcultures can be a significant aspect of LGBT+ youth transitions.

Queer subcultures are prevalent within LGBT+ communities. Formby (2020) usefully reminds us that while there might be solidarity in these spaces, it is not synonymous with similarity and this nuance needs to be kept in mind when researching communities. A consistent finding in research is that LGBT+ communities are an important source of social support. They facilitate interpersonal interactions and relationships, allowing access to networks and meeting 'likeminded' others. Additionally, they provide tailored information, offer mental health and sexual health services, and are a safe space away from the wider societal context (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Formby 2012, 2020). There is a

principal of trust that is present within these communities that allows individuals to be open and honest with others and to establish emotional connections (Hahm et al., 2018; Hines, 2007). Wedell and colleagues (2024) explored the impact of connectedness within the LGBT+ community on the mental health of various age groups and found that it serves as a significant protective factor particularly for young people. However, very few studies have offered a fuller examination of the connection between subculture and youth transitions. Thus, there continues to be a divide between a mainstream transitions approach that largely ignores issues of leisure and youth culture, and a more marginal youth cultural studies tradition (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007). This research will address this gap by exploring how engaging in communities might be important for LGBT+ young people developing their adult identities. Thus, this research will provide that bridge between culture and youth transitions.

Engaging in leisure-based activities are typically how communities can be accessed. Engagement with leisure-based spaces evolves during youth transitions as individuals navigate cultural rites of passage, such as reaching the legal age to purchase alcohol and participate in the nighttime economy. However, there is some disagreement as to whether engaging in leisure is temporary and discontinued into adulthood (Thomson et al., 2004; Yau et al., 2021). Krzaklewska and Cuzzocrea (2024) propose the concept of an 'oasis of youth', based on qualitative research with Erasmus students. This concept symbolises how young people live out a youthful lifestyle (being) while also engaging with transitions to adulthood (becoming). However, by treating leisure and adulthood as parallel and distinct to each other, and based on a niche sample, it implicitly assumes that engagement with leisure is just reserved to the youth stage and fails to consider how leisure can also form a crucial component to 'becoming'. Taylor (2010b) also argues that subculture theory has failed to consider how its relevance extends beyond the category of youth, with their research finding that older participants were found to still be engaging in leisure activities. This research will contribute to this debate by empirically highlighting the need for a broader demographic understanding of the relevance of leisure needs. It will

demonstrate that engagement with subcultures is not just reserved to LGBT+ young people.

### 3.3.3 Relationships (romantic and friendships)

Relationships, whether romantic and/or with friends, are important for developing an adult identity, serving as important sources of social support. These relationships require effort and maintenance, often requiring ongoing negotiations over time: what Thomson et al. (2004) call relational responsibility.

#### *Romantic relationships*

Romantic relationships can be important contexts that can shift in quality, playing an important role in providing mutual social support, bolstering wellbeing, and supporting identity development (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2017; Press and Lewis, 2024). Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2017) suggest that romantic relationships shift in saliency during LGBT+ youth transitions as they gradually become the main emotional source of support, surpassing friends and family. However, as I go on to explore the importance of friendships for youth transitions, authors such as Weeks and colleagues (2001) argue that friendships can provide the same emotional and material support typically provided by one's family of origin. This question of whether friendships do lose their importance over the life course will be considered in this research, exploring how (if at all) LGBT+ young people narrate their adult identities in relation to relationships and friendships.

Weeks and colleagues (2001) research among same-sex couples found that the egalitarian relationship is something that LGBT+ people aspire to. This consists of tasks of mutual care, equal division of labour in the home, and equally looking after dependents and relations. Emotionally, it is about valuing equality, honesty, openness, being close to one another, intimacy of the self and/or body, respect and care for one another. To achieve this, individuals must approach the relationship with a shared commitment to an egalitarian relationship (Setty and

Dobson, 2023). This means that relationships must be negotiated and worked at over time for a reciprocal relationship to be achieved (Weeks et al., 2001). When there is a discontinuation in this reciprocity it can mark a serious crisis for the relationship.

With society placing greater emphasis on individualisation and personal choice, researchers have started to explore the effects of this shift on entering and navigating romantic relationships. Giddens (1992, 1994) argues that these social and cultural changes have sparked a positive and creative response, whereby individuals engage in genuine experiments in living and are rethinking the meaning of their relationships. It is argued that LGBT+ couples are now creating their own ways of engaging romantically, with greater opportunities to build more open and democratic relationships than traditional family structures allowed (Torkelson, 2012; Weeks et al., 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). Chbat and colleagues (2023) also note a shift away from monogamous relationship models, with polyamorous and non-monogamous families being more common among LGBT+ people. These diverse relationship structures help individuals develop sexual agency, become aware of their desires, and gain confidence and freedom in expressing their sexuality (Chico, 2018). These studies demonstrate that LGBT+ young people's values about romantic relationships are likely to vary and go beyond ideas of cohabiting or marriage and therefore an open-minded approach is necessary when considering their views on the significance of relationships. However, pursuing such relationships remains complex as LGBT+ individuals must navigate the persistent inequalities in society. While legal rights for LGBT+ relationships have expanded, rights still continue to be exclusionary and the presentation of 'choice' remains political. This research will consider whether LGBT+ young people perceive their approach to relationships as different, and how (if at all) this impacts their sense of being an adult.

### *Friendships*

Studies consistently find that friendships are significant for LGBT+ young people (Formby, 2017; Press and Lewis, 2024; Weeks et al., 2001). Friendships are likely to be with other LGBT+ people as they share more of an understanding about lived

experiences and thus can provide better advice, guidance, support, and feel relaxed with one another (Doty et al., 2010; Frost et al., 2016; Formby, 2017; Snapp et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2019). This dynamic reduces the need to manage one's identity. While LGBT+ young people may also have non-LGBT+ friends, Doty and colleagues (2010) found that the type of support they offer is likely to be more general and less specific to their identity. It has also been suggested that as LGBT+ young people transition into adulthood, their friends are important for providing guidance and insights on what their adult identity could look like in the absence of broader societal models. Friendships provide affirmation of one's adult identity, which may be lacking elsewhere (Formby, 2017; Weston, 1991). Wagaman et al. (2016) further found that close friendships formed an important aspect to their LGBT+ participants' sense of adult identity.

Weeks and colleagues (2001) argue that friendship groups can form what they conceptualised as 'families of choice'. These families can take various forms among different LGBT+ individuals, often including partners, lovers, and sometimes members of family of origin. Families of choice provide strong and supportive networks and embody the values and comfort typically associated with the family unit. As with relationships, this indicates that LGBT+ people are taking a creative response to how they do families, with friends being a significant component to the creation of a family unit. Thus, it does not represent a thinning of family commitments, but rather a reorganisation of who is family and how family is committed to. These groups are organised around what has been called the 'friendship ethic', where mutual care, emotional and material support, and a commitment to maintaining connections are prioritised (Weeks et al., 2001). Members are open to responding to each other's needs and engage intensely, with shared responsibility for one another's wellbeing. Therefore, with families of choice there is a clear difference between having social friends, and close friends who are seen to be part of the family (Weeks et al., 2001).

Weeks et al. (2001) also explain that families of choice are voluntary and develop over time, requiring ongoing effort to establish a friendship ethic. This process involves being open with friends to receive emotional support, which is a gradual

learning experience (Hawkins et al., 2024). As individuals navigate their friendships, developing close bonds can be non-linear, and their circle of significant others may shift throughout life (Hawkins et al., 2024; Weeks et al., 2001). Despite these changes, the need for friendships remains constant. However, working on friendships can be challenging due to a lack of cultural guidance for forming friendships, unlike those for romantic relationships, which often have citizenship-based recognition. Coupled with other youth transitions, Woodman (2012) argues that people can find it challenging to find regular periods of time to maintain close friendships and deepen new connections. However, what is less known in this field of study is whether LGBT+ young people seek to establish families of choice during their youth transitions or if this process occurs in adulthood. This will be further explored in this research.

### 3.3.4 Identity

It has been suggested that as LGBT+ young people transition to adulthood, they often become more aware of their gender and/or sexual identity (Coleman, 2011) or further explore these aspects if they have already figured out their identity/s during adolescence (Press and Lewis, 2024). This suggests that LGBT+ identity development intersects with the process of becoming an adult, with experiences likely varying among individuals (Kuper et al., 2018; Morgan, 2012).

D’Augelli’s (1994) life span model outlines key processes in identity development: developing a personal identity (thoughts, feelings, and desires), developing a social identity (belonging to communities and networks of people that affirms one’s identity), coming out to others, developing intimacy status, and entering communities. While this theory was originally developed in relation to sexual identity development, Bilodeau (2005) found that these processes are also relevant to transgender identity development. Not all these stages will be relevant to every individual, and they will not always occur in the order presented in D’Augelli’s (1994) model; some processes can be worked on simultaneously, highlighting the diversity in identity development (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005).

Furthermore, identities are not necessarily static and can change with other developments. Kondelin's (2014) research illustrates how developing a transgender identity can influence sexual orientation, prompting individuals to question and explore their sexual identity. The life span model also takes social contexts, interactions, and wider social structures into account (Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull, 2019; Schmitz and Tyler, 2018c) thus complementing a youth transitions approach of understanding how biographical fields interact with identity development.

Plummer's (1995) influential work *Telling Sexual Stories* offers useful insights into the relationship between sexual and/or gender identity and narrative development. It demonstrates how identity shapes our self-understanding, influences how we navigate the world, and helps us anticipate the future paths we might lead. Gender and/or sexual identity can be a symbolic theme of meaning that is central to a person's sense of self and influences what they do in the future (Jackson, 1995). However, there is some disagreement over whether an individual's gender and/or sexual identity features in the development of a primary adult narrative. Cohler and Michaels (2013) and Savin-Williams (2005) argue that because of shifts in social attitudes and more inclusive legislation, sexual identity no longer serves as a dominant narrative for lesbian and gay young people. Nonetheless, this argument only focuses on lesbian and gay individuals with little known about whether the same applies for bisexual and transgender young people. Furthermore, the authors' argument is vague because it is unclear whether they are arguing sexual identity has completely lost its significance or if LGBT+ young people prioritise other aspects of their adult narrative along with their gender and/or sexual identity. In contrast, Press and Lewis (2024) argue that because society is still largely structured by cis-heteronormative norms, developing an affirmed narrative based on their identity/s is still important for LGBT+ young people. More research is needed to better understand how gender and/or sexual identity might influence the development of other adult identities and to address this debate (Wagaman, 2016). This research aims to contribute to

this discussion by exploring the importance LGBT+ place on their identity/s as part of their adult narrative, assessing whether it has truly lost its significance.

Press and Lewis (2024) raise concerns about how to label the narrative of LGBT+ young people's gender and/or sexual identity development. It has been suggested that a strong sense of self, feeling affirmed and confident in one's identity despite societal messages, and maintaining this confidence in various contexts might feature in how LGBT+ young people structure their narrative for their identity development (Scroggs and Venum, 2021). Studies often refer to this narrative as 'resilience' (Harvey, 2012; Herrick et al., 2013), or Wagaman et al.'s (2016) study on LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood in the US used the term 'self-preservation'. However, by labelling it as such, it implies that having a strong sense of self is constantly under threat and frames LGBT+ lives in terms of hardship. This implies that LGBT+ young people should expect to experience lifelong discrimination, which does little to affirm the positive aspects of being LGBT+. Press and Lewis (2024) propose using the term 'thriving' instead, as it avoids a pathologising perspective. Wright et al. (2023) also make a similar point, arguing that the narrative should be flipped to one that emphasises 'queer joy' so that it emphasises more the power and joy one feels in their identity, while also acknowledging how wider structural factors might intersect with the development of this sense of self. This debate between framing the narrative as 'resilience' versus 'thriving' or 'queer joy' will inform how I define and expand on LGBT+ young people's adult narrative in my research.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This research is theoretically interested in how much LGBT+ young people can take control of their adult identities in a post-pandemic society. Moving beyond predictions of the pandemic's long-term impacts, this study will highlight real-life examples of the legacy of the pandemic for LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood. Therefore, this research will rectify the gaps in current literature by offering a novel approach in three key ways. First, it will closely examine how

LGBT+ young people develop their adult narratives and construct their identities, with attention to how wider cis-heteronormative structures shape this process. Second, the research will apply the theoretical concepts of 'biographical field' and 'critical moments' to understand how the pandemic impacted the fields most significant to the development of adult identities, and how the pandemic and/or their gender and/or sexual identity influenced their responses to significant life events. Third, using a qualitative longitudinal research design, it will explore how the pandemic continues to impact these biographical fields and how it shapes responses to critical moments in the ongoing development of adult identities.

# Chapter 4 – Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

There are two aims that underpin this Chapter. The first aim is to outline the methodological choices that were taken to complete this study. Here, I provide an insight into why I approached this topic through a qualitative longitudinal approach that used biographical interviews and scrapbooks, and why Instagram was used to facilitate aspects of this. I discuss each method separately, delving into the methodological literature to offer justifications for why I selected each approach and how it addresses my research questions. I also turn to outlining my approaches to sampling and analysis, before concluding with ethical considerations. The second aim is to share, on a more practical level, how these decisions worked out in practice. I offer a more reflective account of what happened when I went out to recruit participants, to what happened during data collection, before offering a concluding section on how my positionality influenced each aspect of the research. In doing so, I offer an insight into the challenges and opportunities that emerged by putting my methodological choices into practice within the context of doing longitudinal research among LGBT+ young people. To achieve both aims, the sections under each heading are split into two parts. The first part outlines the methodological choices and justifications, and the second part outlines my own reflections.

## 4.2 Research aims

The overall aim of this project is to understand LGBT+ young people's transition to adulthood in a post-pandemic society. LGBT+ young people have been selected for this project as COVID has intertwined with their years of becoming an adult. They were forced to restructure their everyday lives in unexpected ways,

and to either change or delay their future life plans within the wider context of constant change and uncertainty (Scott et al., 2021). It is important that forthcoming pressures they may experience in a post-pandemic society are understood, so that wider support can best help their transitions to adulthood.

This project is seeking to take a retrospective and prospective approach by understanding: (1) how the past two and a half years of living through a global pandemic has impacted the biographical fields of an LGBT+ young person's life, and (2) to use this background knowledge to further understand how they are still being affected by the pandemic. This requires selecting a methodology that allows me to capture and understand elements of past, present, and future in my participants' lives. Similarly, it also requires that I select a research tool where every day experiences can be easily recorded to develop an understanding of the present. Therefore, the approaches and methods I selected to answer my three research questions are:

- Qualitative longitudinal research
- Biographical interviews
- Scrapbooks

### 4.3 Research philosophy

This research explores the interplay between choice and opportunity. That is, I am theoretically interested in understanding how participants exercise choice through their approach to defining adulthood and how they imagine their futures. As has been explored and argued in the literature review, the exercising of this choice and agency can be hindered by the wider socio-cultural context (Press and Lewis, 2023). Therefore, this research is also concerned with understanding how the pandemic might be continuing to affect this exercising of agency to develop an adult identity, and whether participants have had to modify their goals for adulthood in terms of contextual feasibility. Thus, I am interested in reading the social from the personal and considering the dynamic mutuality between

structure and agency (Hoggart, 2012; Thomson, 2011). These research objectives have been underpinned by a critical realist ontological assumption, related to how I conceptualise ‘transitions to adulthood’ and how the impacts of the pandemic are being understood. Margaret Archer’s (2007, p. 22) theory on critical realism makes the following useful points about how we make our way in the world, which will be considered for understanding my participants’ lives:

1. Our personal identities mean we are heterogenous as subjects, and while we may share objective social positions, we seek very different ends from them.
2. Our subjectivity is dynamic, and we modify our goals in terms of contextual feasibility.
3. We are active subjects, not passive, and we adjust our projects to those practices that we believe we can realise considering our situations.

Critical realism posits that individuals experience social phenomena differently, and it seeks to understand these variations in lived experiences (Byers et al., 2022; Patrick, 1998). It examines four levels of reality, each providing a deeper insight into understanding the complexity of a phenomena (Byers 2013). These are: material, ideal, artifactual, and social levels of reality. The material level of reality provides the grounding by understanding what changes occur in an individual’s life and how that changes the contexts they find themselves in. The ideal level of reality explores similarities and differences in responses to a phenomena. Therefore, it is concerned with what resources individuals have access to, and how they use them. The artifactual level of reality explores how individuals’ assumptions and meanings change during the phenomena, and how it shapes how they feel about their futures. The social level of reality is concerned with understanding how wider social structures of society offer explanations for difference in experiences. It acknowledges that individuals will be exposed to different opportunities and constraints that are influenced by structural factors (Correia and Willis, 2020), and there is an inherent interest in the relationship between structure and agency. This can be seen to map onto what has been

theoretically understood as critical moments (see Chapter 3), and which will be theoretically and methodologically used for this project.

Epistemologically, this research acknowledges that LGBT+ young people will have diverse and unique experiences of pandemic, all of which are valid (Leavy, 2014; Asakura et al., 2020). Similarly, participants can have numerous and conflicting perspectives on what being an adult means to them which this study is aiming to understand and will understand them all as equally valid (Ryan, 2018). As stated in Chapter 2, there has been little research exploring the experiences of the pandemic for LGBT+ young people with current research mostly adopting a quantitative approach to studying the pandemic (McGowan et al., 2021). Thus, understanding subjective lived experiences has been side-lined by graphs and statistics that takes away that in-depth level of understanding. By contrast, this study is seeking to fill a gap in the literature by encouraging LGBT+ young people to articulate in their own way how they were affected, and still are being affected, by the pandemic (Lombardi, 2018). Its intention is to focus individually on the stories being told (Parker, 1998).

Overall, a qualitative paradigm was adopted to collect the data. This is because it is more suited to producing data that can report on the diversity and complexity of experiences and feelings about social phenomena, and the eliciting of various meanings (Hakim, 2000; Porta and Keating, 2008). Although adopting a quantitative paradigm would have been useful to reach a wider number of LGBT+ young people, it was not seen as appropriate for this study to quantify the complexities of their experiences. Furthermore, it was not seen as appropriate to use Likert scales or closed survey questions to offer pre-defined definitions of what adulthood means as this may have posed a risk of applying a cis-heteronormative lens to my participants that may not have spoken to their reality (Torkelson, 2012). It is more beneficial to unpack a fuller range of the ways in which LGBT+ young people understand their adulthood compared to a quantitative paradigm that may have limited the range of knowledge I collected. Thus, a qualitative approach was seen as more appropriate in conducting an

exploratory study to understand the variety of experiences and treat each participant as an individual case.

The different methods used for this research are attached to different philosophical assumptions. Biographical interviewing gives primacy to exploring individual lives, the life processes and critical moments that occur, and casting light on the meanings that each individual gives to these processes and why (Herrera-Pastor and Frost, 2021). It reveals knowledge of the biographical fields in which a person is socially located which translates into a social reality with economic, political, cultural and social characteristics. By focusing on the individual narrative and understanding a person's life, it reveals knowledge of wider structures and how these shape it. Thus, using biographical interviews reflects the philosophical and theoretical commitments of this research. With scrapbooks, it is a process of saving, sharing, and making sense of the everyday (Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2021). What participants choose to reflect on and how they organise it into meaning constitutes something significant about everyday life at a more micro level. Thus, this approach allows for developing an insight into participants' social locations in respective biographical fields that may not be elicited through interviews alone. Even with Instagram, it is an app whereby users visualise and construct the reality they are part of and how they communicate it gives meaning to the everyday (Trillo et al., 2021). Being able to access and use Instagram on smartphones allows people to photograph and share the everyday 'mundane' on the social media platform (ibid.). However, caution needs to be exercised over whether the content users upload is a valid depiction of their everyday reality. While I later go on to discuss how I went about addressing this drawback for the project, there was something interesting about the interplay of the visual aspect of Instagram and the portability of the smartphone that seemed it would be a useful method to match the aims of this project.

## 4.4 Research design

### 4.4.1 Recruitment and sampling

Given the longitudinal nature of this project, I wanted the sample size to be relatively small for data management purposes. The aim was to recruit between ten to twenty participants. Twenty participants were carefully set as the upper limit to ensure I would have enough data to analyse in case of participant drop-out (Boys et al., 2003). A sample of this size was also seen as large enough to ensure that there was a good range of individuals from each identity and different ages to maximise potential for comparing similarities and differences in lived experiences (Bryman, 2012). I did not have a strict pre-defined quota for participation from each sexual and/or gender identity, but I did take on a pragmatic approach to recruitment. If I saw that I was recruiting less from a particular identity, then I would put more effort into recruiting participants with that identity. Criteria for selecting participants were as follows:

- *Aged between 18-30 years old:*

There is difficulty in assigning a specific age range to study youth transitions as there is no standardised category that previous studies have used (Arnett and Taber, 1994). Furthermore, youth transitions can vary in length due to various structural and individual influences (MacDonald et al., 2001). As such, the age category of 18-30 years old was selected for this study as it was broad enough to capture the variability of transitional experiences. Moreover, it was expected that I would recruit participants that were aged 16-18 or in their late-20's at the start of the pandemic. Therefore, this age category was a useful one to understand the experiences of young people who were just starting/coming to the end of their youth transitions when the pandemic hit.

- *Identify as LGBT+:*

Participants needed to self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender. The plus was defined to include anyone whose sexual and/or gender identity is not represented in the main acronym of LGBT (LGBT Resource Center, 2021). Transgender is defined as an umbrella term that includes a range of gender identities that fall across, between, or beyond the gender categories of female or male.

- *Had to have lived in England since March 2020:*

COVID policies were different in Scotland and Wales. Therefore, it would have made contextualising participants' experiences in relation to the different policy responses significantly more complex to carry out.

In accordance with the theoretical approach and research aims of this study, a definition of adulthood was not offered during the recruitment process. It was not seen as appropriate to set a definition of adulthood based on the limited research out there as this could have run the risk of me imposing my values of adulthood during recruitment and may have influenced the responses participants gave in the interview. It was felt that it would be more beneficial if participants self-reflected on the concept of 'adulthood' when considering this research and nominating themselves to participate if they felt they had relevant experiences to bring to the project. In fact, when I met participants for the first interview they often said that they were interested in the aim of the research of understanding what 'adulthood' means to them. Quite often defining adulthood would never feature into their day-to-day conversations with people even though it was an important part of defining themselves, and who they are becoming. Participants saw this project as an opportunity for self-reflection and a personal record to look back on this biographical process of becoming an adult. This provided justification for my approach of not pre-defining adulthood on my recruitment poster, as by doing so it may not have prompted participants to reflect on the

concept of 'adulthood' in the way that it did which resulted in them becoming interested in this project.

The sampling strategies I used followed a pragmatic logic in terms of using the most effective ways to find and recruit participants for this study. Publicly identifying yourself as belonging to the LGBT+ community can come with risks of stigmatisation and discrimination (McCormack, 2014). Therefore, it was expected that recruitment could be challenging as some people may have been more hesitant about taking part in this study and disclosing their identity/s. It was important that there was considerable leeway during the recruitment process, resulting in several initiatives being used to recruit participants. As such, this study adopted a mixed sampling strategy using both purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants.

#### 4.4.1.1 Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling was the first approach used for recruitment. Previous studies have successfully recruited seldom heard communities online (Guillory et al., 2018; Barratt et al., 2015). I also knew from previous research that I had undertaken with the LGBT+ population that there was a large presence of LGBT+ young people on various online social media platforms, such as Facebook, Discord, and Reddit, and these proved to be useful platforms for recruitment (Daw, 2021). As such, a two-pronged (online/offline) approach to sampling was selected. First, I used my personal social media accounts (Facebook, Discord, and Reddit) to advertise my study. This involved messaging the admin moderators of the various online communities I had identified as sites for recruitment asking if they could upload my recruitment poster (see Appendix 11) with a brief comment about the study. Secondly, emails were sent to LGBT+ organisations and university associations with my recruitment poster attached. I asked if they could circulate my request for participants among their users, and/or to stick a physical copy of my recruitment poster in communal spaces.

Most LGBT+ online communities thankfully obliged and uploaded my poster to their sites. However, I often found that most of the LGBT+ organisations I approached were swamped with other research requests and/or their day-to-day work, and were unable to share my poster with the young people they worked with. While this did not hinder the overall process of recruitment, it did result in the majority of my participants coming from online spaces, if not from snowball sampling. I received a good amount of interest to this online recruitment strategy, with 19 individuals approaching me over the course of five months when recruitment was ongoing to express their interest in participating. The majority contacted me with a short section explaining that they felt they had a lot to share with me regarding how the pandemic is still affecting their youth transitions. I sent those who contacted me a participant information (PI) sheet (Appendix 1) and consent form (Appendix 2), and asked them to confirm whether they would like to participate after reading this. If they were still happy to proceed with the study, we arranged a first interview together at a time and location that was convenient for my participants. Of the 19 individuals expressing their interest, 8 did not reply at either the stage after receiving the PI sheet or the subsequent chase-up email. I took this as indication that they would no longer be interested in participating.

#### 4.4.1.2 Snowball sampling

I also used snowball sampling as a second strategy for recruitment by making use of my participants' networks (Lune and Berg, 2016). After the first interview I had with each participant, I sent a follow-up email that detailed what would happen in-between interviews and how the scrapbooks would work. Among this, I also asked them if they had any LGBT+ friends that might fit the criteria of the study, and I attached my recruitment poster for them to share with them. This led to 1 transgender participant to contact me, and to subsequently arrange a first interview with them after receiving the PI sheet.

#### 4.4.1.3 The participants

Overall, I had an initial sample of 12 participants with a good range of people falling in-between the 18-30 age category selected. At the beginning of the first interview, participants were asked to self-identify their sexuality and their gender identity using their own terminology. This was for inclusivity reasons, but it was also left open for people to mention if they were questioning some aspects of their identity. For some participants, they identified both as transgender and their sexuality also fell under the LGB+ acronym. See Table 4 below for participants' age, gender, and sexuality, and Appendix 10 for a fuller breakdown of demographics. Ideally, I would have liked to incorporate more cisgender participants, in particular ciswomen, into the study. This reflects broader issues in empirical studies researching LGBT+ young people (Lucassen et al., 2017). Moreover, as my recruitment approach relied solely on online means it meant that initial levels of trust were hard to develop with individuals, which may have resulted in some feeling more reluctant to participate than others. Given that firstly, this study is not intended to be representative of a wider population and secondly, its intention is to focus on the individual stories being told, an under-representation of cisgender participants is not considered to be too problematic.

Participants lived in various locations across England. They were asked to report what their occupation and living status was at the time of the first interview to allow me to trace whether and how the pandemic had affected these dimensions of their life. Over half of the participants were students, but the level of education they were studying at differed. 1 was still in compulsory education completing their A-levels, 6 were in higher education, either completing an undergraduate or postgraduate course. 2 participants were employed full-time, and 1 was self-employed. The remaining 2 participants were unemployed at the start of the interview. In terms of living situation, 5 participants were living at home with their family, 3 were in their own living accommodation (either renting or owned their home), and the remaining 4 were in student rented accommodation.

Ethnicity and social class were largely absent from consideration, resulting in a sample that was predominantly of White ethnicity and with limited data on the social class position of participants. Given that ethnicity and social class are not seen to be primary characteristics for analytical purposes in this research, an over-representation of White participants and the lack of social class data are not viewed as significant concerns.

Participants were also at different stages in their youth transitions. For the youngest ones, they had only just started thinking about their adulthood and they were in the process of thinking about their plans after education. For others, some had clear ideas for what adulthood meant to them, some were still figuring it out, and they were all at different stages in terms of the process towards those markers. Moreover, for some participants who discovered they were transgender during the pandemic, it resulted in some feeling like they were going through a second adolescence as they were navigating new experiences of dating and developing an authentic identity. Being at different stages in their youth transitions, either in relation to defining adulthood or the process itself, was an experience that people were going through irrespective of their age. This further supports the argument that has been proposed in youth literature that youth transitions do not occur at the same rate for people of the same age (Mortimer and Larson, 2002; Thomson et al., 2002) and that this might be especially the case for LGBT+ young people. It further reflects the importance of having a broader age category when studying youth transitions.

Not all 12 participants in this research returned for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> interview, which is a well-known limitation of longitudinal research (Carduff et al., 2015). Following the first interview, I was not able to schedule a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> interview with four of the participants, meaning 8 participants engaged with the latter two phases of the longitudinal interviews (see Table 4 below). For two participants, this was because they were too busy to continue with the study, and the remaining two I did not get any response to my attempts at contact. I reflected on Malterud et al.'s (2015) concept of 'information power' to ensure that participant drop-out did not impact data analysis and the quality of my findings. Malterud

and colleagues (2015) warn that good social science should not get caught up with numbers in the sample, as a small sample size can produce powerful narratives that address the research aims. In the case of this study, I still managed to elicit data from the first interview about how the pandemic is continuing to impact LGBT+ young people’s lives from participants who dropped out, as they were conducted 8-12 months after the full lifting of legal social distancing restrictions. Thus, it was deemed that I still had information power to sufficiently answer my research questions, and these first interview transcripts were included in the dataset. Moreover, previous research, such as Allen’s (2020), has incorporated ten or fewer participants into their longitudinal research and found distinctive and interesting patterns across cases.

**Table 4: Participant demographics:** Participation indicates those participants who continued with the longitudinal study, and those who dropped out.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Participation</b>
<b>Charlie</b>	18	Cisman	Gay	No response
<b>Josh</b>	18	Transman	Gay	Continued
<b>Ollie</b>	20	Cisman	Gay	Continued
<b>Aspen</b>	20	Non-binary	Bisexual	Continued
<b>Abbie</b>	22	Transwoman	Bisexual	Continued
<b>Fi</b>	22	Transwoman	Lesbian	Continued
<b>Jesse</b>	23	Non-binary	Bisexual	Dropped out
<b>James</b>	23	Cisman	Bisexual	Continued
<b>Kate</b>	28	Transwoman	Pansexual	Continued
<b>Oscar</b>	28	Cisman	Gay	No response
<b>Chloe</b>	30	Transwoman	Pansexual	Continued
<b>Mollie</b>	21	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Dropped out

#### 4.4.2 Qualitative longitudinal research

Longitudinal research is the repeated collection of data from a group of individuals at regular intervals over a period of time (King and Roberts, 2015; Mortimer and Shanahan, 2004). For this study, I adopted a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) approach by studying the same cohort of LGBT+ young people who shared the same experience of having lived through the pandemic and potentially had their transitions to adulthood impacted. With QLR, the focus is on biographical processes across time, and it puts emphasis on individual trajectories (Calman et al., 2013). Moreover, change is a key focus for QLR approaches (Holland et al., 2006). Thus, researchers taking a QLR approach look to identify what changes occur in an individual's life, they aim to explore the processes and explanations associated with that change, and they interpret how, if at all, the perspective of that person has changed as a result (Saldana, 2003 and Vogl et al., 2018).

The notion of time is central to QLR to capture the complex relationship between the individual and their multiple contexts (Henderson et al., 2006). Therefore, a QLR approach is best suited when the topic is based on time, such as understanding a specific biographical process (Mortimer and Shanahan, 2004; Carduff et al., 2015; Calman et al., 2013). Time in QLR studies is understood as non-linear, as it looks at processes of change *from-through* rather than *from-to* (Saldana, 2003). *From-to* suggests a discrete start and end point, and the process of reaching the end point is straightforward. In relation to transitions to adulthood studies, it would put more emphasis on understanding whether young people have achieved the end point of adulthood and would overlook the complexity that came with the process (Thomson et al., 2002). *From-through* emphasises a more temporal-based perspective by looking in-depth at the process of becoming an adult, detailing the complexities of the journey. Thus, it can gain a privileged perspective of the subjective biography while people are living through these changes and continuities. Evidently, there is a complimentary and contributory relationship between QLR and youth transitions theory, which helps to make

better sense of the sporadic and chaotic nature of youth transitions (Furlong, 2017; Thomson et al., 2004). The unstructured nature of a QLR approach allows for greater flexibility to explore changes through time as they are lived, exploring how different factors and biographical fields affect one another through time. In accordance with this, the purpose of applying a QLR approach to this study was that by studying the same cohort and regularly revisiting them during their youth transitions, I could capture changes in their experiences, thoughts, and identities as they lived through them (Thomson et al., 2004). I could also capture critical moments that occurred in their lives and understand what influence the pandemic had, if any (Calman et al., 2013; Holland et al., 2006). The QLR approach was integral to developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of LGBT+ youth transitions in a post-pandemic society.

Moreover, I was interested in whether my participants felt they were moving closer or further away from achieving their adult identities, if they had achieved any of them, or if they had re-evaluated what adulthood means to them. To understand and explain the processes that led to that change, it required the incorporation of social and historical time (Henderson et al., 2006; Settersten et al., 2020). Social time was included to understand the wider context of constraints and opportunities surrounding LGBT+ young people before the pandemic. The historical time was looking at COVID and the impacts it had on my participants. Both social and historical time were brought together to understand the significance of the impacts of the pandemic and how it may have shifted or exacerbated some of the issues that LGBT+ young people were already facing pre-pandemic, and how this was continuing to affect their lives. To do this, it combined a prospective and retrospective design (Neale et al., 2012), to enable the consequences of change to be understood. This is where the mixed-methods approach came into this study, by using both scrapbooks and biographical interviews to capture the prospective and retrospective element. For this project, I decided to conduct three biographical interviews with each participant across twelve months. This meant meeting with participants every five-to-six months. Careful consideration of the length of data collection was done to ensure an

appropriate time length was selected that allowed the elicitation of long-term impacts of the pandemic, and the complex and non-linear process associated with becoming an adult. As such, twelve months was seen to be a suitable length of time.

#### 4.4.3 Biographical interviews

The biographical method is an umbrella term for an assembly of loosely related activities aimed at gathering narratives and understanding aspects of an individual's past which are relevant to the present situation (Bertaux, 2002; Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Bornat, 2008). More specifically, they are about understanding what has happened to individuals, where and when, and what the outcomes are. Therefore, biographical methods are commonly used to understand the impact of historical watersheds on individual lives, and to explore in detail the changes and continuities that have happened during that time (Bertaux, 1981; Denzin, 1989; Miller et al., 2002; Nilsen and Brannen, 2009). It was felt that a biographical method would complement the QLR design of this study. This is because it allowed me to take a retrospective approach and incorporate social and historical elements of time (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) by asking my participants to share their biographies on how the last two and a half years of the pandemic affected their lives. I could then use this biographical information to understand how their lives were still being affected.

For this study, I conducted three biographical interviews with each of my participants, and they had the option of doing the interviews in-person or online. As Wengraf (2001) points out, biographical interviews should only be selected as a method when the research questions are specifically concerned with individual biographies, and the changes and continuities that occur in biographical fields. Because this thesis has adopted Henderson et al.'s (2007) framework exploring multiple biographical fields, how they intertwine with each other, their links to adult identities, and incorporating social and historical elements of time,

biographical interviewing was seen as an appropriate method for this project. The open nature of this method was seen to complement the theoretical approach of this project. I applied and adapted Wengraf's (2001) approach to doing biographical interviews for this study. This approach involves asking three types of questions: (1) a single narrative question, (2) follow-up questions depending on the response to the first question, and (3) questions that are not aimed at getting a biographical response but are still important for eliciting information to answer the research questions.

The first interview I had with participants was a merged 'get to know you' session before formal questions related to the study's aims were asked. The 'get to know you' session discussed the research, what was involved, and it was an opportunity for me to answer any questions my participants had and to secure ethical consent for the interview. For the biographical element of the research, I had two single narrative questions. The first question asked, "tell me what your life was like before lockdown". I purposefully designed this question openly, so that my participants could delve into what their lives were like before the pandemic and so that I could get a sense of how significant the social and economic impacts of the pandemic were on my participants. It also allowed me to understand the social element of time, by situating their experiences of life pre-pandemic within the wider constraints and opportunities surrounding them. The second question, "tell me how the last two and a half years of COVID-19 has affected your life?", elicited information on the historical element of time to understand what had changed and continued in participants' lives during the pandemic. Given that by the time of data collection it was just over two years since the first lockdown, a prompt card (Appendix 3) was handed to participants during the interview to remind them of what the various COVID policies had been and how they changed till the lifting of restrictions in February 2022. The third set of questions were more structured ones based on adulthood, what it meant to them and how they wanted to achieve their adult identities. Using this data allowed me to start to understand and draw links between the impacts of the pandemic on their youth transitions. In Wengraf's (2001) approach to using

biographical interviews, they suggest that these three types of questions should be spaced out over the course of three days, with the researcher using the data collected from each day to inform the following day's set of interview questions. Due to time constraints of completing this study, and to respect my participants' time, this guidance was adapted with the three questions compressed into one interview.

The first interview was concluded by asking participants a prospective question, "how would you like your life to be like in the next 12 months in relation to becoming an adult?". This question was theoretically informed by a youth transitions perspective and to understand the interplay between choice and opportunity. Thus, I was interested in understanding the opportunities participants wanted to access and what changes/continuities they wanted to happen to support their youth transitions across the 12 months of data collection. These responses were revisited in the second and third interview to understand whether their hopes and plans were unfolding through time, and what (if any) impacts the pandemic was having on this. As we rounded up the first interview, I also provided guidance to participants on how they might want to use their scrapbooks, and I encouraged them to reflect on the responses they provided in the interview while completing the scrapbooks.

The subsequent second and third interviews were structured similarly in terms of what I asked my participants to help contribute to a more valid interpretation of how the pandemic was still affecting their lives (Herron et al., 2019). In both, I asked a single narrative question, "tell me how the past few months have been since we last met". This was phrased openly so that my participants could give their biographies on what had happened in their lives, and how they felt their youth transitions were going. Reflective questions based on the content of the scrapbooks were also asked so that the meanings behind the scrapbook entries could be collectively unpacked.

Using biographical interviews was seen as an effective method for getting my participants to talk about their experiences of the pandemic. This may have had a therapeutic effect for some in that they could discuss their lives with me, and I

was giving them a space to do so without interrupting them (Broch-Due, 1992). However, there are certain issues with the use of biographical interviews. One of these is that I was getting close to participants' lives and talking about it for the results of this thesis. As such, I had the responsibility of recreating my participants' stories to answer my research questions, and ensuring I interpreted and represented their data in the way they wanted it to be (Pirani, 1992). In the positionality section of this chapter, I discuss this further in how my own identities may have influenced how I interpreted this data and how I addressed that.

#### 4.4.4 Scrapbooks

The use of scrapbooks was the primary method of data collection in-between biographical interviews. Scrapbooks are generally used to gather material privately, and is usually accompanied by some commentary (Bragg, 2010). They are private and personal documents; in some ways it can be seen to mirror the personal nature of becoming an adult. As I wanted to capture the complex and fluid nature of youth transitions and the processes and changes that occurred (Henderson et al., 2007), I selected scrapbooks as the most appropriate method for me to achieve this research aim and answer my research questions. Previous studies have shown that using a method that allows young people to record their 'everyday' lives is useful for getting a good understanding of the complexity of youth transitions. For instance, Worth (2009) used audio diaries to get visually impaired young people to reflect on their transitions to adulthood, finding that this method captured how the narratives of their participants evolved over time and the fluidity of their adult identity formation.

Participants were asked to complete scrapbooks in which their entries were their reflections on how the pandemic was still impacting their relevant biographical fields and what this meant for their sense of becoming an adult. This involved me getting my participants to use their own definitions that were discussed in the first

interview about what being an adult meant to them, and to reflect on whether any critical moments had occurred that had consequences for them achieving those markers. The notion of critical moments was extremely important to this research and Chapter 3 goes into more detail on how critical moments is being theoretically applied to this research. However, with different types of critical moments having different impacts on youth transitions, this has methodological implications. Following Saldana's (2003) advice, I broadly defined critical moments to account for the diverse range of moments that may have happened to participants during data collection. Therefore, my participants could reflect on anything major or minor that occurred in their lives that they felt impacted their sense of becoming an adult. Thus, scrapbooks allowed for a rich unfolding longitudinal narrative to be developed across time (Herron et al., 2019; Karadzhov, 2021), which would not have been obtained had I just used interviews to collect data.

Participants were not obliged to engage with their scrapbooks daily, but they were encouraged to engage with it frequently, i.e. once a month. Scrapbook entries were asked to be emailed to me 1-2 weeks before the interview to allow me to read through them to see what they had included and to shape what I may want to ask them in the interview. This also gave participants the opportunity to familiarise themselves with what they had reflected on, so they could remember and recall easily in the interview (Breheny et al., 2020).

Participatory principles were adopted with the use of having flexible scrapbooks. Young people have the potential to play a significant role in social research and there is a need to develop a methodology that acknowledges their agency as social actors (Heath et al., 2009). It was important that my participants had a choice for how they completed their scrapbook. As such, participants could choose the device to record their experiences and reflections (either a physical scrapbook or on Instagram) and the medium through which they narrated their scrapbook entries (through text, pictures, video, or audio file). Through doing this, it allowed my participants to record what they felt was important to them for this project, in the way they felt most comfortable, and on their own time (Bartlett,

2012; Heath et al., 2009). This was important for two reasons. The first being that I was researching a marginalised community and some of my participants may have had difficulty discussing their experiences in a face-to-face interview. Scrapbooks provided them with an alternative means of recording their experiences without the pressure of a researcher gaze in their presence (Scott et al., 2021; Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2021). Secondly, it was important that the power imbalance was reduced. Participatory scrapbooks were seen as a suitable method for equalising power between myself and my participants and giving them control over when, what, and how to record data for their scrapbooks (Bartlett, 2012; Breheny et al., 2020).

As previously mentioned, participants had the option of creating their scrapbooks using a physical scrapbook and/or Instagram. I provided participants with a physical scrapbook if they opted for that option, or they were asked to create a separate, password-protected Instagram account. Instagram was selected over other apps due to its popularity, longevity, and sustainability. I could have used other apps such as PixStori or EthOS, which are more suited to facilitating visual research methods. However, they are not as mainstream as Instagram, and this may have affected whether participants were willing to engage with the scrapbook if they selected online means. Instagram can also be used on a smartphone, therefore the features that participants may have wanted to use to complete their scrapbooks (camera/microphone) were all on one device, reducing the burden of completion. Similarly, the portability of the smartphone allows access to a range of social and physical contexts, and to capture unexpected/mundane moments (Barriage and Hicks, 2020). Thus, I was able to gain a rich insight into a range of perspectives and reflections on how the pandemic was still impacting my participants' lives and in a range of spaces/contexts.

One of the drawbacks to using scrapbooks, which was especially the case for understanding my participants' youth transitions, was that some of my participants may have felt pressured to submit a 'perfect' scrapbook (Good, 2012; Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2021). That is, they may have preferred to present a

biographically cohesive version of themselves in which they aimed to give a sense of a positive, linear progression towards their adult identities. The purpose of the scrapbook was to capture a sense of how becoming an adult is complex and non-linear, and situating this within the context of a post-pandemic society. Thus, it may have affected the credibility of the data. To address this, I emphasised in the first interview with participants that I was most interested in understanding the process of becoming an adult and there would be no judgement if they had not achieved their adulthood identities by the time the study finished. As I reflect later on in this chapter, I was also still undergoing my own transitions to adulthood while completing this study. I felt it was important to be open about my own experiences of becoming an adult being messy and complex to ease the pressure on my participants to give me a sense of a 'perfect' life.

#### 4.4.5 Instagram @AmIAdulthoodYet?

A main challenge to QLR is participant retention and it was important that I employed effective strategies to engage and retain participants so that good-quality data was produced (Teague et al., 2018). Novel methods, such as using Instagram, are opening possibilities of addressing these well-known issues with QLR (Thomas et al., 2020). As such, Instagram was used as a correspondence method through the creation of a separate research account that encouraged participants to complete their scrapbooks. I named the account @AmIAdulthoodYet?. Using the word 'yet' was a reference to the idea that transitioning to adulthood is a complex process that occurs across time and not something that happens overnight. I also framed it as a rhetorical question which was a nod and a reminder to the whole aim of the project being about LGBT+ young people transitioning to adulthood. During the first interview with my participants, I told them about this account and asked if they wanted to follow it using their scrapbook Instagram accounts or their personal accounts (if they had them). I explained to them that I would be uploading posts that reminded them to

reflect on how the pandemic is still affecting their lives and transitions to adulthood.

There was a worry that my Instagram posts may have been perceived by my participants as badgering them, thereby damaging rapport (Teague et al., 2018). Similarly, participants may have got bored with seeing the same content on the Instagram page after a few weeks and interest may have subsequently dropped off (Bull et al., 2013). As such, I was strategic in what posts I uploaded and when I did so. The posts I uploaded were bright in colour and used a variety of visuals to ensure my posts were not all the 'same', and accompanying captions included prompt questions (see Appendix 12). Similarly, I uploaded a post once a month, or at the time of specific events such as Pride, so that it matched the guidance I provided my participants of completing the scrapbooks once a month.

#### 4.4.6 Data analysis

Data collection resulted in audio recordings of longitudinal interviews (which I transcribed verbatim), and entries from participants' scrapbooks. I stored all the data from this project in NVivo. The analysis, write-up, and representation of qualitative longitudinal data is one of the most important aspects of doing QLR (Henderson et al., 2012). It requires methodological innovation that can account for the complexity and richness of the data that goes beyond the usual conventions of cross-sectional data (Saldana, 2003). As outlined earlier in the Introduction chapter, my research questions are both exploring what LGBT+ young people are transitioning *to* in relation to their adulthood, and the process of transitioning *across time* in a post-pandemic society. These research questions are both synchronic and diachronic in terms of what analytical approach they require to answer them sufficiently. As such, I utilised (1) case study, (2) temporal, and (3) thematic analysis. This involved a process of multiple readings of the data across time, switching between the three different analytical gazes for comparison. This was done in accordance with Thomson and Holland's

(2003) suggestion that all three are necessary for a coherent and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study. This section discusses respectively how definitions of adulthood and experiences of becoming an adult in a post-pandemic society were analysed.

#### *Markers of adulthood*

Both an individual case and cross-case analysis was applied for different purposes. After the first interview I had with my participants, individual case analysis was initially applied to generate themes of adulthood. These themes primarily acted as guidance for both my participants completing their scrapbooks and to provide background information for analysing and understanding scrapbook entries and interview responses.

To answer the first research question, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was selected to generate themes of adulthood across the data. For this project, a theme was defined as a section of the data that shared a meaning with an organising central concept (Braun and Clarke, 2020). This required considerable attention to what sub-themes should be included in a theme. RTA focuses on exploring the meanings that make up the themes and locating them within wider socio-cultural contexts (Braun and Clarke, 2021) while also maintaining the nuance of each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2020). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was also considered as an approach for this research, as it seeks to interpret personal meaning making within a given phenomenon (Smith et al. 2009). However, this approach primarily focuses on the subjectivity of people's experiences and gives less consideration to the wider social context. Therefore, RTA was perceived to be an appropriate analytical approach for this project as it complements a critical realist ontological assumption and allows for a consideration of cis-heteronormative structures and how that interplays with the themes.

The six steps involved in RTA, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2020), were followed for this project. The first step is familiarisation which I completed by transcribing each interview and individual case analysis outlined above. The second step is to

generate codes that capture a significant attribute of the data in relation to the research questions. This was completed using NVivo due to the ease of the software and simplicity of keeping all data analysis in one space. The third stage was to generate themes by identifying patterns between codes, the meanings that they shared, and what concepts can be used to organise these shared meanings together. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2020) suggestion, these themes were reviewed at the fourth stage. This is a critical stage of RTA and it is important that the researcher keeps in mind how a theme is defined and the importance of having one meaning that makes up a theme. Thus, reviewing the themes of adulthood was ongoing. The themes were named as the fifth stage. In total, I generated four themes of adulthood markers. The sixth stage is the write-up, and Chapter 5 'Adulthood markers' will outline and interpret the four themes of adulthood.

As RTA progressed, the individual case analysis completed beforehand complemented the generation of themes with clear connections being identified with the two approaches. Specific themes of adulthood were generated from the individual case analysis, pertinent to the stage of life and context participants were in. For instance, themes such as 'complete degree' and 'buy a house' were generated. These specific themes acted as a strand of meaning for the themes of adulthood generated from cross-case analysis.

#### *Ongoing impacts of the pandemic*

To understand the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and use this to understand how it is affecting participants' youth transitions, this involved switching between the three different analytical gazes for comparison: case study, temporal, and thematic. The creation of case histories was the key tool for analysis (Yin, 2003). Taken from the work of Thomson (2011), the aim of the case history for this project is to provide a compelling account of the individual, of how and why events unfolded as they did, how narratives change over time, and the relationship between the individual and wider social and historical contexts. A pragmatic approach to this temporal analysis was selected to allow for efficient management of the quantity of data collected. A 'life grid' matrix was constructed

for each participant using Excel (Grossoehme and Lipstein, 2016; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). The construction of this life grid was theoretically informed by a youth transitions approach whereby the y-axis included 10 biographical fields relevant to the markers of adulthood, and the x-axis mapped biographies at each time point (see Appendix 4). The use of biographical interviews and asking questions around the different biographical fields complemented the construction of these grids, demonstrating its use as a method. Each participant had the same life grid to structure and analyse the data, however I have approached the telling of the case histories in the following findings chapters through different sequences that capture the processes of change over time and how these interplay with wider processes.

To each of the 'cells' created by this grid, I added abbreviated notes and codes that captured what was going on in the participant's life at the time. Each life grid allowed me to temporally see and analyse how participants discussed their process of achieving adulthood, if they felt they were moving closer or further away from achieving adulthood, and to understand the processes of change (Saldana, 2003). Thus, it proved useful for applying 'critical moments' as an analytic device to understand and identify what contributed to the processes of change. Furthermore, I could also elicit the biographical significance of critical moments that emerged over time, allowing me to analyse whether a critical moment had turned into a turning point (Holland and Thomson, 2009). With the generation of individual case histories and focusing on the particular, I was interested in the connection between the unfolding lives of my participants and wider social and historical processes, as well as how their sexual and/or gender identity worked throughout. This allowed me to understand how the wider context of the pandemic/post-pandemic society influenced the transitions to adulthood for each participant. Thus, it speaks to what Henderson and colleagues (2006) theorised about the importance of time to QLR. It is these case histories that form the basis of the following findings chapters that address the ongoing impacts of the pandemic.

After each life grid was completed, I also undertook a cross-sectional, thematic comparison of key themes across participants to understand the similarities and differences in experiences (Vogl et al., 2018). While I was more concerned with understanding individual lived experience of the pandemic for LGBT+ young people, I was also interested in understanding whether experiences were similar or different along gender and/or sexuality lines, as well as other identities and demographics that were recorded for each participant. The cutting up of interview transcripts and completing each life grid cell gave access to recurrent themes and divergent responses from all participants. These were written up as summaries and inserted into a second, separate matrix (see Appendix 5) which allowed common themes and experiences to be identified (Wertz, 1983). This required looking back and forth between this thematic analysis and the individual temporal analysis for understanding whether participants experienced similar critical moments, and whether there was a similarity or difference in how these were responded to. Similar themes, common sequences and differences in experiences were elicited from data analysis, and those began to yield broader themes and firmer conclusions. This yielded a very generalised orientation, but individual differences and inconsistencies were kept in view, and this is reflected in the findings chapters. Thus, each case history included in this thesis reflects a pattern within the broader data of shared experiences of the pandemic, comparable resources, and each point to a significant aspect of the markers of adulthood identified from the data. While the purpose is not to generalise from the case histories, by going into depth and plugging in the interplay of these wider processes it will capture something of the experiences of LGBT+ young people in a post-pandemic society and contribute to a generative understanding of social change while retaining the nuanced lives of each participant (Thomson, 2011). Thus, a careful and considerate decision of what cases will be included in this thesis has been made.

### *Scrapbook analysis*

When conducting research using visual data, they are either treated as either 'topic' or 'resource' (Harrison, 2002). However, in this project I approached

treating the scrapbook data as both the subject of investigation and a lens to better understand a predefined subject matter. Brown and Collins' (2019) guide on systemic visuo-textual analysis was useful for thinking through how to analyse the scrapbook entries and incorporate these materials in this thesis.

After participants emailed me their scrapbook entries prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> interview, these were initially analysed for methodological purposes. This involved considering what was being reflected on and what biographical field it was in relation to. These went on to guide the interview questions whereby specific entries were co-analysed (Heath et al., 2009) and contextual information could be plugged into the entries. All of this was undertaken with the research questions in mind.

As the final stage of analysis, a systemic visuo-textual analysis was completed to explore how the scrapbook entries might relate to the longitudinal analysis already completed, and how they might make up a part of each case history. This involved triangulating each scrapbook entry for individual participants, the accompanying interview excerpt, and the case histories generated for each participant. Meanings generated from the scrapbook were compared to the case history to explore and identify conceptual connections. By triangulating these data sets, I provide a nuanced account of post-pandemic experiences and how that is impacting transitions to adulthood. Some of the findings chapters include the combination of these data sets where it was felt most relevant.

#### 4.4.7 Ethical considerations

This study followed the ethical guidelines created by the British Sociological Association (2017), and ethical approval was granted by the Durham University Department of Sociology ethics committee in October 2022.

The first important principle for conducting ethical social research is gaining consent from participants (BSA, 2019), and conducting longitudinal research requires that consent from participants is ongoing (Thomson and Holland, 2003).

This is because it should not be assumed participant consent from the start of data collection carries throughout the period of data collection. In accordance with this, a rolling consent process was used during data collection whereby I sent emails to my participants every 2 months to check in on them and to make sure they still consented to participating in the project. Two weeks before each interview with participants was scheduled I also contacted them to remind them of the interview and to check they consented to taking part in a second and third interview.

After I received expressions of interest over email from potential participants, I emailed them each a participant information sheet (Appendix 1), a consent form (Appendix 2), and a privacy notice (Appendix 6). They were asked to read these three documents and sign the consent form prior to arranging a first interview with them if they were happy to proceed with the research.

The use of Instagram for this study prompted specific ethical ways of working such as considering how data is used and stored by the app company (Hadfield-Hill and Zara, 2018; Barriage and Hicks, 2020; Linabary and Corple, 2019). Thus, in the privacy notice and consent form I informed participants of how Instagram would be used for this study and how Instagram would collect their data. It was important participants knew about this risk before they started to create their scrapbooks, so that they could make an informed decision as to whether they wanted to create an online or physical scrapbook. If participants wished to use Instagram then they were asked to sign a second section on the consent form that indicated they were aware of the risks and they consented to complying with my guidelines on how to adjust privacy settings on Instagram. After the first interview, I sent an Instagram guide sheet (Appendix 7) to participants who had indicated they would be using the app for this research. This was done to avoid assuming all participants would know how to use Instagram, and to show in a clear and accessible way how they can adjust their privacy and data sharing settings.

Before starting each interview with participants I assured them that they could stop the interview at any point, and they could skip questions they did not want

to answer. Similarly, it was important that I let my participants select the space in which they did the interview to ensure they felt as comfortable and safe as they could be (Stoudt, 2007). As part of completing their scrapbooks, participants also had the option of using photos for entries. As Volpe (2019) and Wilkinson (2016) point out, LGBT+ young people may feel uncomfortable taking videos or photos in certain spaces where they may be marginalised or that poses a risk to their safety. I therefore briefed participants on the consent form and in the first interview that they should only capture and use visual data where they feel comfortable doing so.

Throughout data collection I was developing a rapport with each of my participants, therefore it was important to be ethically aware of how that might impact what participants included in their scrapbooks. For instance, it was possible that participants would create scrapbook entries in which they reflected on negative events that happened in their lives during data collection (Day and Thatcher, 2009), or gradually disclose more personal and confidential information (Thomson and Holland, 2003). For example, some of my participants created scrapbook entries where they reflected on their enjoyment of education gradually declining over time, or that identity development was not happening at the rate they were wanting. To address this, it was important that I practiced relational ethics with my participants (Herron et al., 2019). When more private information was disclosed to me, I asked participants if they meant to share this for the purpose of the research or whether it should be treated as a personal communication. While it was not my role as the researcher to provide emotional assistance to participants, after the end of each interview I emailed each participant a de-brief sheet that provided contacts for relevant support organisations (see Appendix 13). I also dedicated time in the final interview with each of my participants to reflect on the research process before we concluded the data collection.

Walking alongside participants and seeing their lives in progression during a longitudinal study can also impact researchers (Neale et al., 2012). For me, as stated in the Introduction chapter, I was also still on this biographical process to

adulthood myself while researching my participants. At times, some of my participants went through similar life processes to me, yet were having different experiences of it, shaped by the pandemic. For instance, while I had already been to university and had a relatively smooth experience in terms of limited disruption to my studies and development of friendships, some of my participants' university experiences continued to be disrupted throughout the research process with friendships unable to be reconnected with. To ensure my wellbeing was not affected during this process, I kept a personal diary in which I reflected on my internal processing of doing this research and my lived experiences.

All participants were assigned a pseudonym by me. No information that could lead to the identification of participants has been included in this thesis. For instance, throughout data collection I was getting more information with considerable detail of my participants' lives which may have easily led to the identification of my participants. Therefore, any quotes from interviews that included information that may have revealed the identity of participants, such as street names, dates of events, or names of friends and family were changed while transcribing the interviews. I sent each of my participants a copy of their interview transcript to show them how I had anonymised their data, and to see if they wanted anything else to be anonymised. I also went through my participants' scrapbook excerpts with them at the end of each interview so that they could give me their permission about which I could and could not include in the thesis. Any photos that included the face of my participants and have been included in this thesis have been blurred, but photos that included their friends/family have not been included in this thesis. Furthermore, following Roberts (2015) advice, before providing direct quotes or posts from Instagram in the write up of the thesis I searched the posts online on Google to make sure it could not be traced back to the original Instagram account. If they were, they were not included.

Having a corresponding research Instagram account that I used for keeping in touch with my participants posed a particular ethical issue of maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of my participants' accounts. This is a similar issue that crops up with focus groups, in that the participants who followed the

research account could see who else was following the account (Burke-Garcia et al., 2017). As such, I made it clear in the consent form and expressed the importance of this in the first interview that participants should respect the privacy of other account followers and should refrain from sharing personal information to others.

I also needed to consider whether both the research account and personal scrapbook accounts would be made public or private on Instagram, which is a concern that researchers need to consider when using social media for research (Bealieu and Estalella, 2012). The recent rise of online harassment highlights the potential implications for researchers' inattention to privacy issues (Linabary and Corple, 2019). In line with this, I decided that both the research and scrapbook accounts would be made private. As such, participants were informed in the information sheet and consent form that if they wanted to set up a scrapbook Instagram account then it needed to be private, individual-password protected and have two-factor authentication enabled. Following Walling-Wefelmeyer's (2021) approach to using scrapbooks, only participants' scrapbook accounts were allowed to follow the corresponding research account. As I had the research account details, I sent these details out to my participants after the first interview and I closely monitored follower requests to ensure that the correct people followed the account (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015).

Participants also needed to use their own devices to use Instagram. This added an extra risk of parental gaze, with parents gaining unwanted access to their phones (Wilkinson, 2016). It was the participants' responsibility that their smartphones were password protected and that they kept their smartphones safe and secure. When sending me the scrapbook entries from Instagram prior to follow-up interviews, data needed to be encrypted when transmitted. Failure to ensure safe passage could have meant compromising the data, opening the transmission to hackers (Hadfield-Hill and Zara, 2018). Therefore, participants were asked to email me their scrapbook posts as screenshots, which had two-factor authentication enabled that added an extra layer of security.

## 4.5 Research in practice

### 4.5.1 A 'hard-to-reach' population?

As discussed in the 'recruitment and sampling' section, the majority of my participants came from online spaces if not from snowball sampling. Recruiting most of my participants from online spaces has taught me a few lessons as an early career researcher researching LGBT+ young people. In particular, the term 'hard-to-reach' is often applied to the LGBT+ community (Guillory et al. 2018; Gatlin and Johnson, 2016; Hughes et al. 2021). When it came to recruiting participants online, the relative success of recruitment was down to my participants being very open and willing to speak to me about their experiences. The fact that all my participants were out and open with their sexuality and/or gender identity in the different spaces they were part of could be a factor that made them feel comfortable approaching me as a researcher. A lesson I have learned from this is that there is a nuance to the term 'hard to reach' that needs to be understood in a literal and relational sense. In a literal way, as my recruitment strategy focused heavily on online spaces, there will be LGBT+ young people who are not using those online spaces due to issues of digital exclusion, parental gaze, or personal preference that means they would not have seen my recruitment poster to take part in this project. Furthermore, I am not part of offline LGBT+ spaces which may have been another useful avenue for recruitment. However, from a positional and ethical sense, entering those spaces as a heterosexual, cisgender researcher may have affected how members felt in those spaces and my motives for entering those spaces would be different to the motives of the members already present. Focusing my approach online enabled a degree of separation and safety for participants. On a relational level, while all my participants were out and open with their identity/s, there may have been other people who are also out but do not trust researchers due to fears of how their data might be (mis)represented. Similarly, they may not be out or still questioning their identity and not have wanted to approach a researcher, who

they have no relationship with, to talk about their identity. What I have learned from recruiting for this project is researchers need to be critically aware of how 'hard-to-reach' is applied and who we apply it to. Researchers should reflect on their positionality as a researcher and their identity/s for thinking about why people might not want to approach them to participate in research. It also requires that we think about what spaces we are using to recruit participants, who is (not) part of those spaces, and whether we are entering those spaces with the right motives.

## 4.5.2 Data collection

### 4.5.2.1 Interviews

The first interviews took place either online using Zoom or were face-to-face. When I asked where would be convenient for them to do the interview, I always offered to go to a location of their choice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering most of my participants came from online spaces, most of them opted to do the interview online. While I understood why they opted to do the interview online on Zoom for their own convenience, it did strike to me that moving working practices online was a result of the pandemic and this has clearly stayed in people's lifestyles. Even in the day-to-day conducting of my research and collecting data, the practices I adopted came because of the pandemic.

The first interview I did with participants was a merged introductory 'get to know you' and interview questioning session (see section 4.4.3). During the introductory session, participants spoke about how they were drawn by the process of reflecting on their adulthood and the process of scrapbooking to record their reflections. Some were looking forward to dedicating some time reflecting on how they feel their lives were progressing and to have a record of this, rather than living through the moment and having no record to look back on. This was something that struck out to me, as I have been aware throughout the

whole journey of completing this PhD that the nature of my research topic is very personal to people, exploring their lived experiences as they live through it. Thus, people may have been less inclined to participate in this project and open themselves up to a researcher. However, encouraging participants to think and reflect on their futures through a creative means seemed to be a way that helped reduce this barrier. Humanising myself was an important aspect of my ethical approach to interviewing. It was important that in this session I allowed participants to ask me questions about myself, why I was doing this research, and that I was open in my responses. I did have a few participants who were interested in my own lived experience and how I came to decide to research this topic (see section 4.5.3 for more detail). Following this introductory session, the interview moved on to asking the more formal questions for data collection.

I brought an interview guide (see Appendix 8 and 9) with me to every interview. The first interview guide was split into three experiential categories: 1) life before the pandemic, 2) life during the pandemic, and 3) transitions to adulthood. This three-staged design was created so that participants could think back on their lives in a chronological order and not have to do a lot of back and forth. In practice, however, most of my participants largely discussed their life before and during the pandemic simultaneously. It is possible that participants, by default, focused on the biographical fields that were significantly impacted by the pandemic. Thus, I often made sure to make a note of the biographical fields they discussed and asked further prompt questions about the fields they had not discussed to get a good insight into their lives during the pandemic. For instance, one of my participants focused his response mostly on his education and his relationship with his husband, as they were significantly affected. I made sure to ask him questions around his friendships, family, being part of the LGBT+ community, and mental health to which he then also offered responses on how these were also impacted by the pandemic.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> interviews were markedly different in that they were more focused and sought to capture participants' youth transitions in a more 'everyday' sense. Thus, at the beginning of every interview, I gave each participant a reminder of

what they discussed in the previous interview about what adulthood means to them to help keep them focused on the topic at hand. Participants were asked questions based on their scrapbook entries, why they included what they did, and to clarify any content if needed. If participants reflected on critical moments, I asked questions about how it made them think and feel, whether it had changed any dimensions of their life, and what it meant for them becoming an adult. With the guidance of their scrapbook, participants went into much more depth talking about their experiences of the process of becoming an adult.

As mentioned previously in this chapter, one of the drawbacks to using scrapbooks is that participants may feel pressured to give a biographically cohesive version of themselves (Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2021). As such, analysing the scrapbooks before each interview required that I paid close attention to what was (not) being recorded, using the biographical data I had already elicited for each participant to guide this process. Furthermore, formulating questions on the scrapbooks before the interview required extra ethical reflexivity on my part as a researcher for thinking about why it might be that the participant omitted details previously discussed and how I navigated this questioning in the interview. At the beginning of each interview, I always made sure to clearly indicate I would be talking about topics that were not included in the scrapbook, and to ask whether they were willing to discuss them with me. For instance, one of my participants during the first interview discussed the importance of her partner for social and emotional support while she was going through her gender transitions. However, there was no content on her partner in the scrapbook so I needed to be aware that this might be because her relationship had broken down. When it came to meeting this participant for the second interview and I asked how the previous 5-6 months had been for her, she voluntarily mentioned that her relationship had broken down. This indicated to me that she was willing to talk about this during the interview, but I did also make sure to clarify with this participant if this was the case.

The final interview with participants concluded with a reflective section on the last 12 months of being part of this project. In the first interview, I asked my

participants what they would like their lives to be like in 12 months' time in relation to the process of becoming an adult. At the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> interview, I reminded participants of what they said in the first interview and offered a summary of what happened in their lives over the last 12 months of data collection. Here, I asked questions about whether they felt their transitions to adulthood had gone in the direction they wanted it to, whether anything had changed about what they felt was important, and what impact the pandemic had on that. Again, this required ethical reflexivity on my part as a researcher for how to navigate this questioning. I was aware that I would be asking questions about personal topics, and I was also aware that during data collection some of my participants had experienced negative critical moments. Thus, it was important that during the interview I informed them when we would move on to a different section, what would be involved, and I established whether they were happy to discuss this with me.

Throughout data collection, I got the sense that my participants were quite keen on providing me with an update on how their lives had been going since we last met. A lot of them mentioned that they felt a lot had happened in their lives over the previous six months and they were looking forward to sharing those insights with me. This provided further justification that selecting 12 months for longitudinal data collection was a suitable length of time for capturing changes in their youth transitions. Perhaps it was the creative element of the scrapbooking providing a record of their lives changing that prompted this feeling among my participants, or that I provided them with a verbal record of where they were in the 5-6 months since we had last met and they could see how their lives had changed. After I concluded the second and third interview, a couple of my participants mentioned that they enjoyed having interviews with me as they felt I was an objective and neutral observer that they could offload how their lives had been progressing and not be met with judgement or opinions from friends or family. For instance, Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 2) mentioned that she “quite enjoyed the prompt questions [I] asked [her], as [she] hadn't been asked them before and [she] enjoyed being able to reflect more on her life”. Similarly,

some participants mentioned that they were planning to continue with their scrapbooks after data collection had finished as they enjoyed having a record of the progress they were making in their youth transitions. Kate (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 3) talked about how her scrapbook “reminds me of some stuff that I previously felt and I think it’d be really interesting to read back on”.

Hearing participants’ reflections on how they enjoyed having interviews with me triggered a self-reflection on my positionality and the impact this might have had on participants. I also felt that participants enjoyed the interviews and were open with me: they would talk about various topics such as relationships breaking down, trying out new sexual encounters, struggling with education, and mental health. Here, I think my age (being 24 and 25 during data collection) was a contributing factor to this comfort, as being relatively close to the age of my participants would have made me seem more relatable and less intimidating than a senior researcher. Furthermore, I did not notice differences in relationships with my participants in terms of my gender and sexuality, even though this was the main topic under focus and some of my participants had asked questions around my identity. I think that showing thought and empathy to my participants’ responses put them at ease for being open and honest with me. Therefore, I agree with Quinlan et al. (2022) when they suggest that it is imperative that researchers show gratitude for and empathy with the responses their participants give. Ultimately, it is difficult to know whether participants omitted details about what had happened in their lives during the 12 months of data collection. But, I feel their commitment to the research and rich level of detail captured in the interviews and scrapbook is testament to the good level of rapport I established during the fieldwork process.

#### 4.5.2.2 Scrapbooks

In total, 3 of my participants selected Instagram to complete their scrapbook, 7 opted for a physical scrapbook, and 2 wanted to use both Instagram and a

physical scrapbook. During the process of designing the methodology for this study I felt incorporating Instagram into the methodology would increase the appeal of the project to potential participants as this app is incredibly popular among young people (Marquez et al., 2023). It was to be expected that Instagram would be a more popular means of scrapbook completion than the physical scrapbook. However, the number of participants that selected Instagram compared to physical scrapbooks suggests otherwise. A few participants mentioned that while Instagram would be a lot easier for them, they liked the idea of having something physical to make their personal reflections on and having a literal blank page to be creative with. This suggests that including the option of a more 'conventional' medium is not necessarily any less appealing than social media, and researchers should consider using both for youth studies. Furthermore, it reinforces the point I made earlier in this chapter that creative methods of data collection are well suited for researching personal topics with sensitivity.

The rate at which participants engaged with their scrapbook differed. While all stuck to the guidance of making reflections once a month, 3 of my participants did more than one reflection each month. For the participants that did monthly reflections, on most occasions this would be a retrospective reflection on what changes had happened in their lives that month, how it had impacted them, and how it affected their transition to adulthood. For the participants that did reflections more than once a month, this would tend to be making reflections soon after something significant had happened. Several approaches were taken to completing the scrapbooks. On Instagram, scrapbook entries were fairly standard due to how Instagram works, whereby my participants uploaded a picture(s) of something (un)related to their reflections and the accompanying caption would be their reflection. For the physical scrapbook this is where it varied. Some of my participants took more of a visual approach to creating their scrapbook entries, whereas others took more of a textual approach. The pictures below are examples of excerpts from three of my participants to show how varied their approaches were.

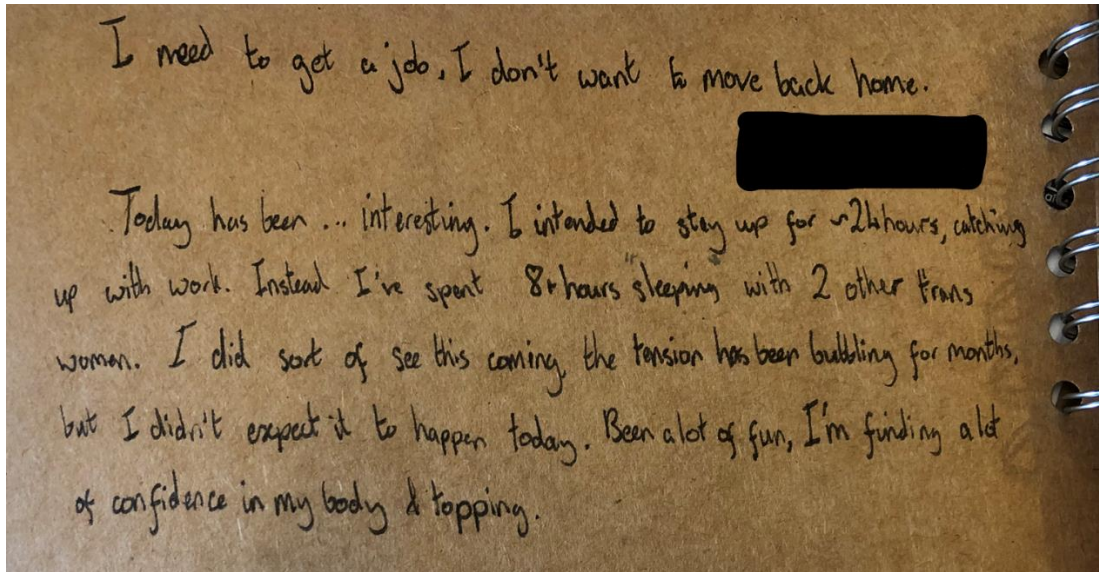
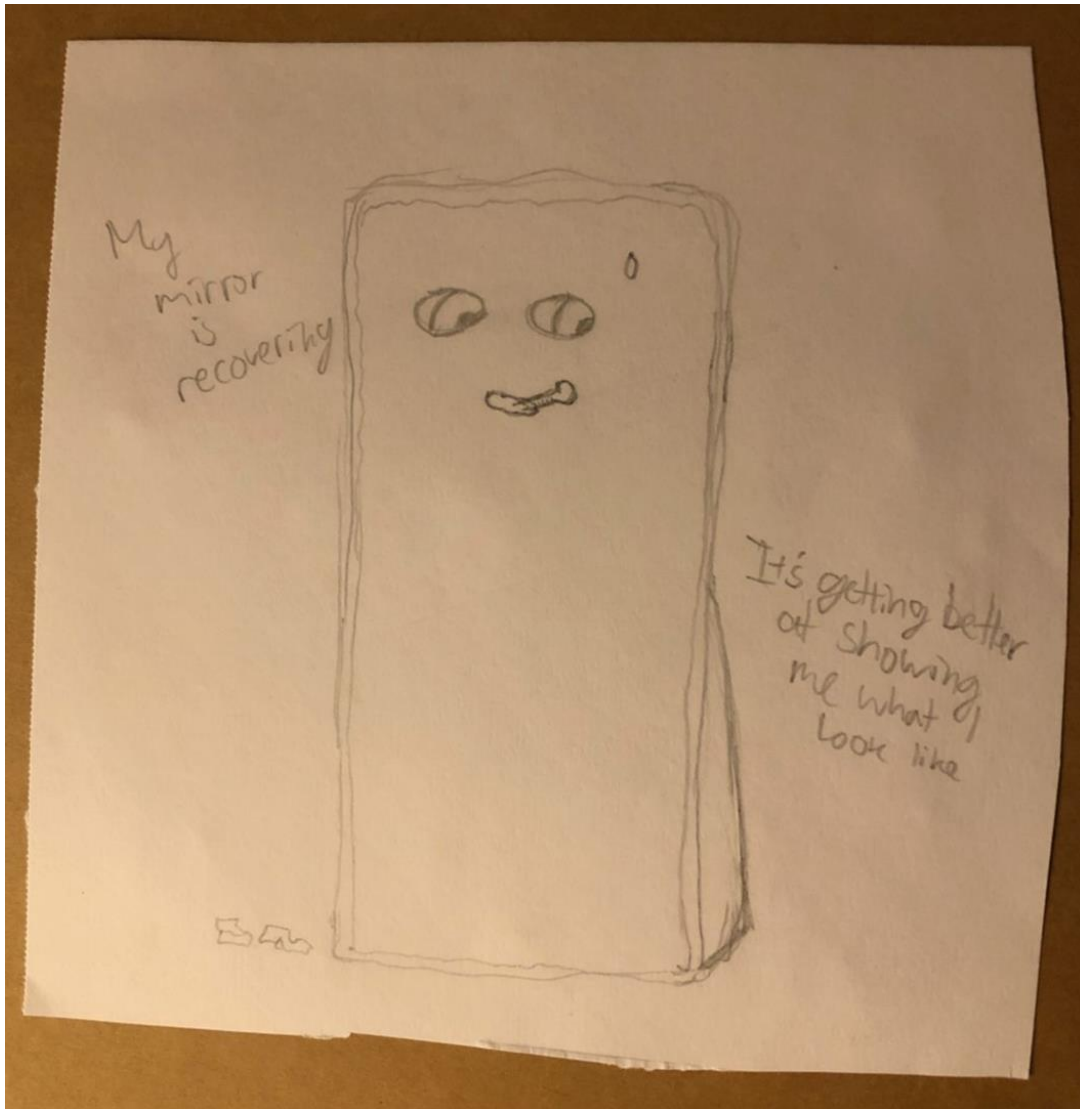


Figure 1: A participant's handwritten scrapbook entry reflecting on their desire to continue living independently, as well as their struggles with balancing educational commitments and developing sexual autonomy.



Figure 2: A participant's Instagram scrapbook entry, including a picture and caption, reflecting on their sense of adulthood after completing compulsory education.



**Figure 3: A participant's handwritten drawing reflecting on gaining confidence in their gender identity.**

As mentioned previously in this chapter, there was a risk that my participants felt pressured to submit a 'perfect', biographically cohesive scrapbook (Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2021). It has been suggested by Marquez et al. (2023) that young people create a digital persona on Instagram that is heavily edited and only shows 'positive' aspects of their lives, resulting in their digital persona being markedly different to their offline persona. Using Instagram for participants' scrapbooks may have resulted in some feeling pressured to create a digital persona that was markedly different to their actual experience of their transitions to adulthood. However, several of my participants did quite personal reflections where they

reflected on negative critical moments such as friendships and relationships breaking down, or their mental health being impacted.

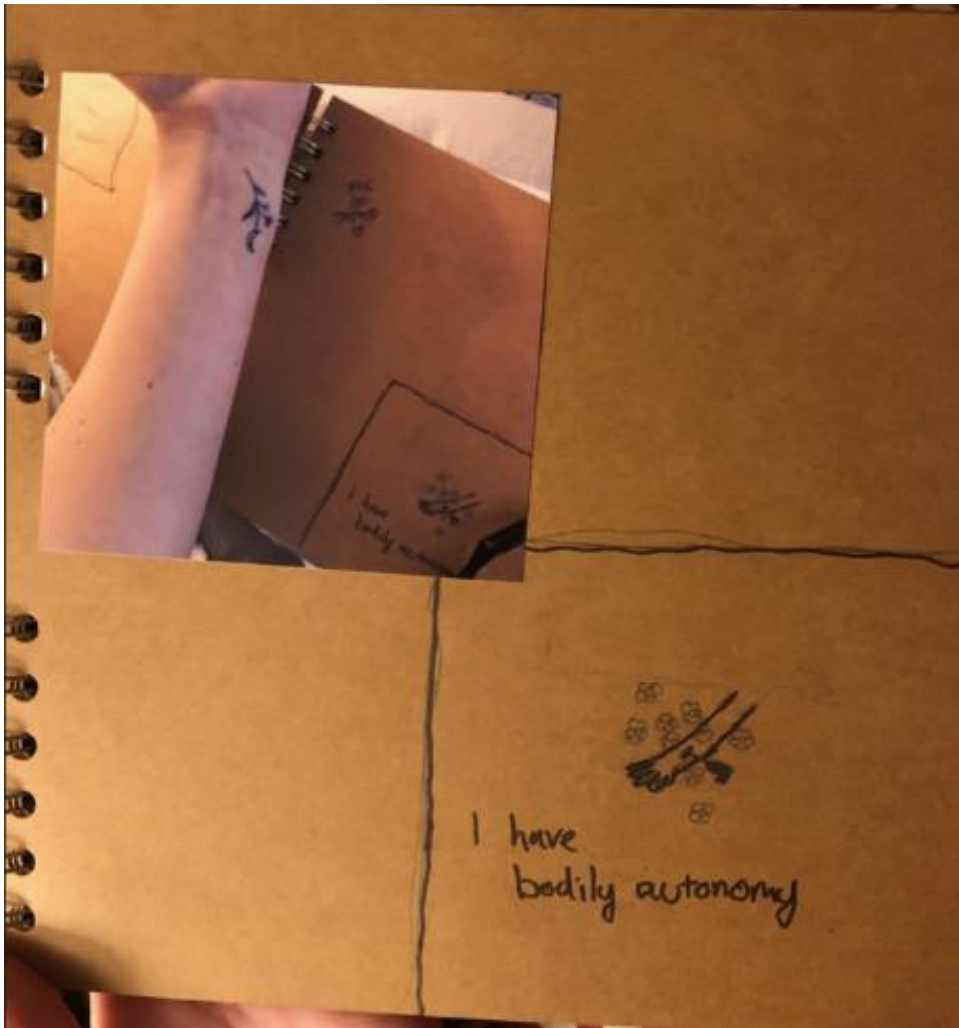
Furthermore, as Walling-Wefelmeyer (2021) argues, scrapbooking is a process by which the individual saves something significant from the 'everyday' sense, and through reflection gives meaning to its significance. Some of my participants included scrapbook entries on 'everyday' moments or microprocesses that had happened that did not immediately result in significant changes but were important for how participants felt about themselves and their adulthood. For instance, entries on having an argument with their family and/or trying out new practices of embodiment were included. Thus, participants' scrapbook entries captured the complexity of becoming an adult. Two examples have been included below, which includes a participant getting their nails painted and another who had just got a tattoo, both of which were significant for shaping the relationship they had with their body. Therefore, scrapbooking as a method complements the qualitative longitudinal approach of studying time *from-through* (Saldana, 2003) and getting an insight into *how* young people continue to arrive or move away from their adulthood markers, rather than *when* or *if* they have reached the markers.



Got my nails done. Something I wouldn't have done before I felt like an adult, and something I couldn't do during COVID restrictions.

Although, the nail technician I went to see started her business during COVID as restrictions eased after the first lockdown. She made the choice to start her own business and operate out a summerhouse in her garden as working in a salon or bigger company no longer seemed the best option.

**Figure 4: A participant's Instagram scrapbook entry reflecting on the process of getting their nails done and their sense of adulthood.**



**Figure 5: A participant's handwritten drawing reflecting on their experience of getting a tattoo and gaining control over their body.**

However, not all my participants took to the process of scrapbooking. An anticipated drawback to using scrapbooks as a method was that my participants may have felt as though completion was a chore, or they may have forgotten to complete their scrapbooks entirely (Bartlett, 2012; Herron et al., 2019). When it came to arranging a second interview with two of my participants, they mentioned that they had not completed their scrapbook since the first interview because they felt they could not commit enough time to doing the scrapbook and subsequently dropped out from the research. This drawback has been identified elsewhere in the literature on scrapbooking (Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2021), that some may find it an intensive process and one that does not work for them. This highlighted to me that while using creative methods is a useful way for

researching personal topics it may not work for everyone. In hindsight, having the flexibility to let participants decide if they want to continue the research but without the scrapbooks may have prevented participants from dropping out of the project.

#### 4.5.3 Outsider research

I came to this research primarily as an outsider, as I am not a member of the LGBT+ community. Within the methodological literature, there is an ongoing debate around outsiders doing research with a marginalised community, with no consensus being reached as to who is most appropriate for doing that research (Grove, 2017). Research being done by an insider is often seen as beneficial for developing a greater rapport with participants (Heaphy et al., 1998; Perry et al., 2004) and having a better understanding of the data (Berger, 2013; Merton, 1972). Feminist researchers also argue that outsiders pose a risk of misrepresenting marginalised communities in their analysis and portraying them in a way that reproduces wider negative societal stereotypes (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996). Thus, researchers may not approach data analysis with the same empathetic understanding and quality of rigour that is crucial for qualitative research.

By contrast, others state that outsider researchers can also produce the same level of high-quality data as insiders. For instance, Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2022) suggest that outsider researchers can also gather data of an in-depth quality because they are more likely to approach data collection with more curiosity and ask further questions to avoid misinterpreting participants' responses. Furthermore, King and colleagues (2019) suggest that when outsiders approach and enter a community they are not part of, it can be one of the greatest ways of facilitating social change. It gets everyone involved in learning, contributing, amplifying, and responding to knowledge about the experiences of communities. It disrupts the status quo that LGBT+ issues are only of concern for LGBT+ people (Howarth, 2002). Overall, this debate highlights that having an

insider or outsider status in relation to participants can bring about different strengths and weaknesses at different stages of the research. It was important that I reflected on my outsider status throughout this project to ensure I was aware of it and to understand how it may affect each stage of the research.

Moreover, it was important that my outsider status did not influence or shape the rapport I had with my participants throughout data collection, as this may have affected how open participants were with me. As Scott (2022) reminds us, a key part of conducting successful longitudinal research is about sustaining a relationship with your participants which helps to maintain your sample over time. In the first interview with participants, I introduced myself and explained why I was doing this research. I emphasised in the introductions that I was most interested in giving participants a voice to express their lived experience and perspective, and that I was mostly keen on listening to their stories. Furthermore, throughout data collection I constantly put my participants' needs at the centre, I responded with thought and empathy to their responses, and most importantly I showed my gratitude for asking my participants to retell their lives. This follows from Quinlan et al.'s (2022) advice that participants should feel that they are being researched *with* and not *about*.

Another key debate specific to conducting LGBT+ research is whether researchers should disclose their non-LGB sexuality or not (Grove, 2017). Participants may feel misled or disappointed if researchers do not disclose their sexuality (Izzard, 2004). Alternatively, if researchers do state they are heterosexual without prompt, it may be seen as silently reinforcing heterosexual privilege and increasing the power imbalance between the researcher and participant (Braun, 2004). I decided not to disclose my sexuality at the start when I introduced myself, however it was important that honesty and integrity was established at the start of data collection. Therefore, I opened the space after introducing myself and invited participants to ask me any questions about myself, what my motivations were behind doing this research, and how I would be using their data. Participants did show an interest in asking why these were my research aims, and if my own sexuality had shaped this. In my response to their

curiosity, I talked about how my transition to adulthood was economically impacted by the pandemic and how that resulted in me volunteering for a research-based charity and working on an LGBT+ campaign. I was also honest with participants about my own sexuality, and I talked about how becoming unemployed and deciding to volunteer were formative in me developing an interest in researching this topic. By being open with participants who asked, perhaps it eased them by knowing why I was doing this research.

While I started this research primarily as an outsider due to my non-LGBT+ status, there were times throughout this study that this status varied, and I became more of an insider with my participants. I follow Hellawell's (2006) concept of 'liquid inbetweeners', in that researchers are rarely ever a complete insider or outsider in relation to their participants. Throughout the course of the study there may be times when researchers can relate to their own participants' experiences, and other times they may feel detached from them (Barnes, 2021). While I am not a member of the LGBT+ community, I am a young person still undergoing my own youth transitions and experiencing some of the life progressions that my participants are. In designing this research, my insider status meant I was aware and had some personal experiences of the ways in which the pandemic affected young people's sense of progressing in life. I also believe that this aspect of my insider status aided me in developing a rapport with my participants as we shared the same emotions of the frustrations of online learning or feeling burnt out after endless job applications.

#### 4.5.4 Positionality and reflexivity

As discussed in the previous section, I was aware that my outsider status as a non-LGBT+ researcher may have influenced how I understood and interpreted participants' data. To address this issue, prior to data collection I engaged with a wide range of academic literature and online resources from LGBT+ support organisations to ensure I approached data collection and analysis with a good

understanding of sex, sexuality, gender, and LGBT+ experiences (Grace et al., 2006).

Furthermore, I was aware that I would be using my own voice and words to turn the data I had collected into knowledge for my thesis (Drake, 2010). It was therefore of particular importance that my own subjective experiences of the pandemic impacting my youth transitions, and personal characteristics, did not determine what data was included in the findings chapters (Howarth, 2002; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996; Kalu, 2019). As such, after I transcribed the first interviews with participants, I briefly analysed them to see what aspects of participants' lives they focused on for how they were impacted by the pandemic. I made a summary of these for each participant, and I emailed it to participants asking to see if their responses had been interpreted correctly. This ensured that as data collection progressed, I had established an accurate understanding of participants' lived experiences. Moreover, throughout the whole analytical process I followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance that researchers should reflect on their positionality while coding and generating themes, being aware of why they are coding the way they are and why they are noticing things that are significant to them. Kohl and McCutcheon's (2015) advice of engaging in 'kitchen table reflexivity' was followed to allow this reflective process. This involved using my supervisors, both of whom have many years of experience researching young people and LGBT+ people, one of whom is also a member of the LGBT+ community, to discuss the collected data and how I had interpreted it. It was through having these conversations that alternative ways of interpreting the data were offered, allowing for my positionality to become explicit and developing a greater understanding of the data I was collecting.

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided rationales, overviews and reflections pertaining to each of the varied research strategies that I used to conduct this research. There

were several novel approaches that this study adopted in terms of research design: firstly, adopting a qualitative longitudinal interview design to understand the long-term impacts of the pandemic, and secondly, employing participatory scrapbooking within this. The detailed and rich data set that these strategies produced will be explored in chapter six, seven, and eight.

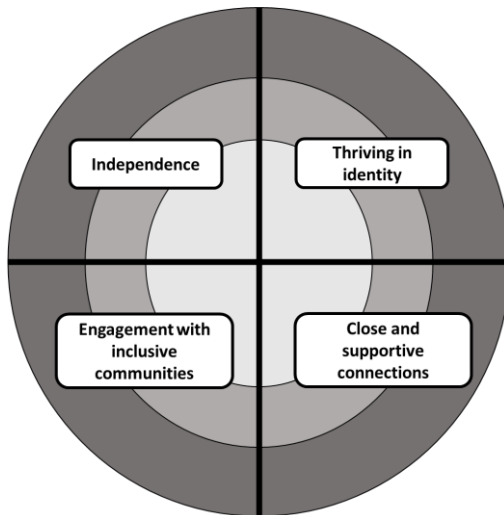
# Chapter 5 – Adulthood markers

## 5.1 Introduction

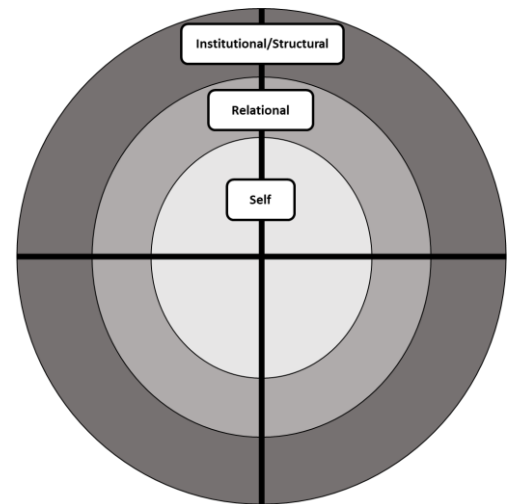
This chapter is based on the four themes of adulthood generated from the reflexive thematic analysis of the first interviews conducted with participants. Some participants' quotes from the second and third interviews have also been included in this chapter where themes of adulthood were further discussed. These themes answer the first research question:

1. How do LGBT+ young people understand their adulthood?

These four themes are: (1) Independence, (2) Close and supportive networks, (3) Engagement with inclusive communities, and (4) Thriving in identity. They are visually represented in the two diagrams below. These two diagrams have been inspired by Henderson et al.'s (2007) *Inventing Adulthoods* study that created similar visual diagrams from their own empirical findings of youth transitions. These diagrams effectively capture the complexity of becoming an adult by acknowledging the distinct meanings of each marker, and how it involves self, relational, and structural levels. Thus, these diagrams respond to the theoretical calls that an understanding of youth transitions should involve exploring how developing an adult identity interacts with subjective, objective, relational, and structural dimensions (Coleman, 2011; Pustulka, 2022). The diagrams below differ to the *Inventing Adulthoods* study in terms of the themes of adulthood that have been generated. Moreover, this study places diverse gender identities and sexuality at the centre for understanding why these markers are important to LGBT+ young people.



**Figure 6: Markers of adulthood**



**Figure 7: The different levels to each marker**

The diagrams above also allow for connections between each theme of adulthood to be identified and understood further while retaining the separate meaning each theme has. These connections have been identified as taking multiple dimensions, such as how one’s sense of feeling like an adult is dependent on their social location in other respective markers. For instance, an individual’s ability to engage with inclusive communities is dependent on the progress they have made toward financial independence. Alternatively, the social location an individual is at in relation to a marker shapes the values they place on other markers. For instance, if an individual does not have a close and supportive network it may result in more value being placed on engaging with inclusive communities. Each theme has some form of relationship to each other and will be explored in further depth in the rest of this chapter.

This chapter has been split into five sections. It begins with a broad overview of how participants defined their adult identities and developed an accompanying narrative, exploring how these narratives interact with societal expectations of adulthood. This section will also consider how participants envisioned their process to adulthood before the pandemic, providing contextual information to understand the impact of the pandemic in the subsequent three chapters. This chapter will then go on to explore the four themes of adulthood respectively, discussing their significance for LGBT+ young people and unpacking the nuances and interconnections between each theme.

## 5.2 Understanding adulthood

When discussing what adulthood means to participants, the majority talked about feeling ‘different’ compared to others (friends, family, other members of the institutions they are part of). This was in relation to how they define adulthood, and the pathways they envision for achieving their adult identities. Participants referenced their gender and/or sexual identity for why they have this sense of difference in relation to their adulthood, which prompts them to think about what they want their future to look like and how they need to get there.

The majority of participants referred to, or implicitly referenced, the ‘big 5’ markers of adulthood<sup>1</sup> (Jaffe, 2018; Settersten and Ray, 2010) to discuss what is societally expected of them and how they would place themselves in relation to those expectations. Participants explained that this is where this sense of difference is mostly felt. For instance, Fi talked about how she actively resists the underlying cis-heteronormative expectations surrounding societal expectations of adulthood. She explained:

“You know, you’re supposed to move out of your house, you’re supposed to get a fairly permanent job that you can work 9 to 5, and you’re supposed to have a heterosexual monogamous relationship with someone of the opposite gender which you’re exclusive in, and you’re pressured to raise a family. I really do not like the obligation [...] I think that fits very, very few people in actuality. Cis-heteronormative monogamous normativity, I don’t like it”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

Similarly, for Chloe (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1), she talked about how to “finish school, go to college, go to university, get a job, get a wife, get a house, have a family” is the pathway that had been “laid out” for her. Chloe talked about how these societal markers of adulthood heavily influenced her understanding of how to develop an adult identity. However, Chloe critiqued this

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<sup>1</sup> These 5 markers of adulthood are known to be: (1) Leaving full-time education, (2) starting a full-time job, (3) leaving the parental home, (4) entering marriage, and (5) starting a family.

pathway as too restrictive, arguing that it does not allow for individuals to exercise their agency and personally decide how they want to define and develop their adult identities. Aspen (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how these societal expectations are “a means of suggesting obligation, some kind of duty” that do not fit with their personal values. They expressed, “A lot of these things that is invoked, I don’t really put much stock into it [...] I don’t value these life markers for their own sake“. How Aspen likened these societal expectations to “obligation” and “duty” can be interpreted as being linked to narratives of citizenship in that individuals have a set of obligations to fulfil in order to receive citizenship rights. Aspen’s perspective resonates with the findings of Lister et al. (2003) who argue that as young people transition into adulthood, they start to develop an understanding of their status as citizens and the expectations imposed by the state.

It is also interesting that participants were still citing these societal expectations of adulthood. As discussed in Chapter 2 and 3, society has moved into a late-modern, neoliberal era, where the emphasis is on individuals working on self-projects to make reflective decisions about their life trajectories (Giddens, 1991). This shift has resulted in youth scholars such as Arnett (1997, 2000, 2004) to argue that what constitutes the ‘normal biography’ has become less clear, with societal expectations declining in their influence on youth transitions. However, the above finding demonstrates that despite this idea of ‘choice’, societal expectations of adulthood continue to remain as benchmarks that people are expected to strive towards or compare their lives to. Consequently, this finding challenges the argument that the movement from ‘normal biographies’ to ‘choice biographies’ is applicable to *all* young people. It further adds to the call that the interaction between personal agency and social structural constraints still needs to be considered for understanding youth transitions (MacDonald et al., 2001). Furthermore, this finding also demonstrates that while LGBT+ young people can identify what the wider societal expectations of their adulthood are, they actively resist their applicability to their own lives. This resistance can be understood as participants reclaiming the uniqueness of their subjectivities (Young et al., 2014).

Participants' gender and/or sexuality identity influences their approaches to family and relationships. In relation to family, participants made a distinction between 'family of origin' and 'family of choice' (Weeks et al., 2001). Participants felt that society and the state place pressure on individuals to maintain connections with the family of origin, reflecting dominant norms that define family primarily through biological or legal ties (ibid.). These expectations do not account for other kinship-like relationships that participants value and associate with a sense of family, or for those who do not wish to maintain a relationships with biological relatives. Moreover, some participants expressed that societal expectations of relationships are too rigidly defined, and the ways in which they want to engage in intimacy and/or relationships are neither acknowledged nor validated at a broader societal level. Specifically, participants discussed that there is an overwhelming focus on being in monogamous relationships that will eventually result in cohabiting and/or marriage. This has resulted in non-monogamous relationships being perceived as deviant or atypical. This is reflected in Abbie's account when talking about her experiences with polyamory:

“With polyamory, I have to work out how to have both the long-term relationship and polyamory work. It's seen as someone is sleeping around, they don't have committed partners, it's very much they're just a slut sleeping around [...] It is about knowing I can do this and have a girlfriend and we can both be happy about that”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

Abbie's account highlights her belief that polyamory is often misunderstood as promiscuity, which undermines its recognition as a legitimate form of deep, emotional connection. Abbie must exercise higher levels of agency to self-affirm to herself that there is a deeper, emotional level to polyamory, because the lack of accurate social representation makes this harder for her. Ollie (20, cisman, gay, interview 1) expressed a similar feeling, stating “I don't see how polyamory is really any different to a regular relationship”. Consequently, their relationship choices are frequently questioned in terms of validity. It is because participants are LGBT+ that they feel societal expectations surrounding family and relationship are shaped by cis-heteronormative norms, which are not

accommodating to their own individual needs. This argument will be further explored in this chapter.

Some participants also discussed that cis-heteronormative norms are embedded in societal expectations of how gender roles should be performed within a relationship, which they feel do not align with what they want from a relationship. For instance, Aspen talked about how:

“Patriarchal roles are enforced on people dating, I can’t fucking navigate them. I just can’t, I just can’t manage. This is definitely a part of it, especially in the sex life. I don’t want to have to worry about fulfilling X role and I can just do what I want to do”. (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

Here, Aspen is talking about how they struggle to navigate wider cis-heteronormative expectations of intimacy as a non-binary person. They emphasise how societal expectations impose a bodily expectation for performing intimacy, which does not accommodate their own personal expectations or identity. This issue relates to Plummer’s (2005) concept of ‘intimate citizenship’, which argues that individuals should have a right to determine their personal, intimate lifestyles while maintaining control over their bodies, feelings, and gendered experiences. Although this argument was made nearly two decades ago, it remains relevant for today’s society, highlighting the need for further efforts to expand the inclusive potential of citizenship beyond a binary understanding of gender. Consequently, where participants feel a sense of difference continues to be around having limited bodily control and choice during intimacy.

The continuation of the narrative of ‘difference’ is particularly noteworthy when compared to earlier studies. The findings of this study resonate with the findings of Donovan and colleagues (1999), who identified a lack of recognition and validation for diverse LGBT+ relationships as important to how individuals felt their choices were perceived and accommodated. Conducted toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior to significant legislative changes aimed at equalising opportunities for relationships and families, participants in that study emphasised the importance of having equal access to civil partnerships,

marriage, and family life. However, the findings from my research reveal a paradox between neoliberal citizenship, which emphasises active citizenship and managing own lives, and the types of choices deemed acceptable by the state (Kelly, 2006). It illustrates that the concept of choice continues to be political.

Some participants also discussed how their process of defining adulthood and working out what is important to them is marked with uncertainty and instability. From knowing that independence is an important marker of adulthood and feeling guided in how they would achieve it, after independence they feel that they must figure out what adulthood means to them on their own. This is largely due to the lack of broader cultural guidance or narrative on what LGBT+ adulthoods look like. This is reflected strongly in Mollie's account:

“I've only ever known one lesbian who is an adult. I had not known that many adults who were gay. As morbid as it sounds, my thought process is people like us don't get to adulthood. How else do you explain that? I think the realisation that there can be gay adults, but I have to make that future for myself, I have to pave my own way, I simply have to make my own idea of adulthood”. (21, ciswoman, lesbian, interview 1)

James (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1) also talked about how the concept of adulthood is “very fluid”, it can be “made up along the way”. This finding resonates with Freeman's (2010) argument that what young people are societally expected to become as adults can be interpreted as epistemic injustice, as these expectations often overlook the experiences of LGBT+ young people and deprive them of the resources necessary to develop their own adult narratives. Participants expressed that they must self-construct their adult identities because the available guidance is irrelevant to their experiences. This challenges Arnett's (2000, 2007, 2014) 'emerging adulthood' theory, which argues that young people are now taking up the opportunity to work out what adulthood means to them and how they want to reach their adult identities. The way participants discussed the process of working out adulthood themselves suggests that they are not pursuing this path out of encouragement but rather out of necessity due to a continuation in cis-heteronormative regulation over youth transitions. Thus,

their experiences reflect a form of compulsory agency rather than voluntary agency that Arnett theorises.

Participants described developing adult identities as an ongoing process characterised by terms like ‘constructing all the time’, ‘very fluid’, and ‘made up’. This perspective offers further insight into the extent to which LGBT+ young people perceive the ability to obtain adulthood (Torkelson, 2012), which has received little attention in research. It suggests that LGBT+ young people may expect developing an adult identity to be an ongoing process. This resonates with Henderson et al.’s (2007) theory of competencies and investments in adult identities, which argues that access to material, cultural, and social resources can lead to instability between expectations and reality during the transition to adulthood. While participants’ understandings of adulthood were vague, they expressed a desire to engage with LGBT+ communities, explore urban living, and have a close and supportive network to help in figuring out their adult identities. This indicates a priority for reclaiming the uniqueness of their subjectivities and pursuing their self-defined adult identities (Young et al., 2014). Moreover, it offers insights into the contexts that will facilitate their adult identity development, which will be further explored in the rest of this chapter.

Difference was also expressed in relation to how participants described their journeys toward adult identities. For example, transgender participants expressed that the process of going through social and medical transitions, along with the embodied changes they were experiencing, heightens their awareness of progressing into adulthood at a slower pace compared to their cisgender peers. This was reflected in Josh’s account:

“It’s different for everyone [...] For me, I’m literally going through puberty a second time right now. I don’t think going through puberty you can be really classed as an adult. For me it’s going to be I’m not going through puberty anymore”. (18, transman, gay, interview 1)

Similarly, for Abbie:

“I think feeling like a complete person is somewhat important to my sense of adulthood. It will definitely help when I’m past that awkward puberty stage, a second puberty stage which is really odd”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

Ideas of adolescence feature in both accounts, drawing on the paradoxical experience of becoming an adult while simultaneously navigating the adolescent processes of puberty, an experience that is mostly unique to transgender young people. This difference in pace makes some participants feel different to others, as they perceive their journey toward adulthood as taking longer. They also recognise that their experiences in approaching other developmental process, such as finding employment will differ. For instance, Abbie discussed her future job prospects and how her transgender identity intersects with this, placing importance on her transition to improve her prospects:

“Being trans is a part of me, but currently it’s a block of job prospects. I still get that twinge of uncertainty with every time I open my mouth. I think, are they going to judge me for who I am and stuff. So just being able to pass under the radar I certainly think that’s a helpful skill”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

Both findings expand on Jenkins’ (1996; 2014) theory, which argues that the development of an adult identity involves a constant tension between sameness and difference, and individuals get a sense of who they are and who others are from this tension. This research contributes to this theory through a diverse gender lens, illuminating how the process of gender transition intersects with other youth transitions, resulting in a perception of becoming an adult at a slower pace than anticipated. Furthermore, it highlights the critical need for the healthcare system to become more streamlined, enabling transgender youth to access gender-affirmative care when needed. Delays in this care can significantly impact their transitions into adulthood. This finding also offers additional criticism of the outcome of the Cass Review and the banning of hormone therapy for gender questioning individuals under 18 (Horton, 2024).

Most participants discussed that becoming an adult involves multiple developmental processes happening simultaneously, such as gaining independence and engaging in new friendships and relationships. Participants also do not want to be overwhelmed by having too many developmental processes occur at the same time. Similarly, they do not want to have a sense that their life is not progressing by having too few processes occurring, or none at all.

### 5.3 Independence

All participants discussed independence as an important aspect of their adult identity. This theme involves four biographical fields: education, employment, family, and living situation, which will be discussed respectively in this section. This finding aligns with other research indicating that developing independence is a fairly uniform experience for (LGBT+) young people (Kneale and French, 2018; Wagaman et al., 2016). Participants were at different stages in their transitions to adulthood, which led them to highlight different critical moments as important for achieving independence. These moments included completing their education, getting a job, living independently, and developing independence from their families.

Furthermore, independence was an interesting adulthood marker for thinking about the sequencing of becoming an adult. Participants stressed that independence plays an important role in shaping their approach to other adult identities, such as developing their gender and/or sexual identity, forming relationships and friendships, and engaging in communities. Importantly, participants acknowledged that partial independence is still valuable in addressing other aspects of adult identity. Therefore, full independence does not have to be achieved before progressing on other markers. This relates to Henderson et al.'s (2007) theory that an individual's social location in relation to

one marker of adulthood can influence how they engage with and develop other markers.

### 5.3.1 Education

Entering Higher Education (HE) was discussed as an important first step towards achieving independence. Among the 12 participants who completed a first interview with me, 1 was still in sixth form with plans to attend university. 5 were at university studying at an undergraduate level, and 2 of those participants had plans to continue into postgraduate study. Additionally, 1 participant was in the process of completing their PhD at university.

Participants discussed university as important for developing independence in two ways. First, by developing a subjective sense of independence through increased self-responsibility and maturity, and second, by establishing an objective sense of independence related to their living situation and having some separation from their family:

“I’m paying rent, I’m doing laundry, I’m cooking every single meal for myself. If I want to be fed I need to feed myself, nothing is being done for me, I’m just doing all the chores. I guess I’m just basically, completely independent when it comes to stuff like that, and just having to look after myself”. (Josh, 18, transman, gay, interview 1)

“I felt a lot of relief about being independent when going to university. I could keep a distance from my mum at arm’s length. So I wouldn’t talk to her for as long as I could get away with”. (Oscar, 28, cisman, gay, interview 1)

Getting a degree was also seen as important for helping facilitate the development of a career. Despite what is known about graduate outcomes and the saturation of the graduate market (France, 2016; MacDonald, 2011), there was still this belief among participants that HE would propel them into the graduate market. How participants narrated education was that they were placing a lot of pressure on themselves to achieve highly, either in relation to their

A-Levels to get to a higher ranked university, or to achieve a more advanced degree qualification, such as studying at postgraduate level, to give themselves a unique edge for approaching the graduate market. This relates to what Brooks (2017) argues, which is young people are now going to greater lengths to distinguish themselves from other graduates, and this includes completing post-graduate qualifications. To achieve highly with education, participants emphasised that it is important that they approach education in a responsible way, remain focused on their learning, prepare well for exams and assignments, have good time management, and to continue to enjoy their subject(s):

“I need to keep a strong head for my course, making sure I’m managing things alright. [...] Continuing to be good about my course is a big thing”. (Ollie, 20, cisman, gay, interview 1)

Participants viewed HE as a biographical field where they would feel competent, which is a significant reason for why they continued with HE (Henderson et al., 2007). For some participants, their enjoyment of a particular subject at A-level motivated them to deepen their skills and knowledge in that discipline at a higher level. They believed that HE would be an environment that matched their skillset, allowing them to adapt to a different mode of learning and to continue successfully achieving with it:

“I wanted to go to university and use that to get a decent job. It was never really that much in question, and I also did pretty well in maths based and like stemmy subjects at school. I wanted to come to university because I like learning”. (Abbie, 22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

Abbie’s quote above is interesting for thinking more closely about why young people continue to pursue Higher Education despite the known challenges of diminishing graduate opportunities. She talked about how going to university was never “much in question”, she knew she “wanted” to come to university while in sixth form. In fact, the majority of participants in this study were either still in HE or employed, with their highest qualification being a bachelor’s or postgraduate degree. This suggests that HE is still seen as a golden ticket to prosperous economic independence, and perhaps alternative options are not being

considered in depth. As Ryan and Lorinc (2015) have argued, while there has been a governmental push towards young people completing apprenticeships after compulsory schooling, a cultural shift towards valuing apprenticeships has not occurred. Thus, the argument Ryan and Lorinc (2015) made almost a decade ago is still relevant to contemporary society.

Moreover, beyond educational values, HE was also seen as the first opportunity for some participants to start exploring their gender and/or sexual identity. University was seen as a biographical field that would socially and culturally benefit participants. For some, they discussed how they were quite selective over which university they attended, as they wanted to attend a university that had inclusive accommodation for their transgender identity and was located in an area deemed safe with good visibility of LGBT+ communities:

“North Wales, it’s very, very good for trans people. They have an accommodation option just for LGBT people which I thought I’ll feel a lot safer because I didn’t know how I felt about living with people that I don’t know how they feel about LGBT people and that was really scary”. (Josh, 18, transman, gay, interview 1)

“I wanted to move to the south coast. I have to remember sometimes that I am in a little pocket of the world that is so much more accepting”. (Ollie, 20, cisman, gay, interview 1)

Exploring one’s gender and/or sexual identity is facilitated by the discovery of new LGBT+ spaces and communities, interactions with new people that they might not have had access to before starting university, and the independence gained from being away from family. This finding demonstrates that university continues to play a significant role for LGBT+ young people and their identity development, similar to what previous studies have found (Ellis, 2009; Formby, 2015). It further supports Fu’s (2023) argument that understanding the significance of education in youth transitions requires acknowledging how this biographical field offers opportunities for social participation, moving beyond the traditional economic perspective of education. This is reflected in Fi’s account of how she narrated moving to university and the impact this had on her gender identity:

“During my time in high school I had a lot of confusing feelings that I would tend to suppress because I didn’t feel comfortable talking to my mum about them, nor my dad. Going to university is a complete change of scene, *it was a total overhaul of my life*. It let me think about things that I couldn’t around my parents because I felt guilty. It let me meet other people like me, and therefore it opened the possibility to consider transition and consider LGBT people. [...] So yeah, university gave me the perspective that I needed to realise about myself”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

### 5.3.2 Employment

Employment was discussed as essential for developing financial independence and unlocking further opportunities for independent living, as well as becoming independent from one’s family. Among the 3 participants who were employed, 1 was self-employed while 2 held full-time positions and had been working for one year by the time I met them for the first interview. Additionally, 2 participants were unemployed.

Participants expressed a relationship between employment and its impact on their subjective sense of being an adult. Participants expressed the importance of having economic stability, particularly in terms of having reliable contracts and a stable income. Some participants also had specific career plans they wanted to follow and had expectations of where they would be in their career at certain ages. Thus, they wanted to work in an environment where they felt both that their career progression would be supported by colleagues and that they would have access to wider opportunities for professional development. The relational element to youth transitions was significant in this context.

Participants also discussed that economic stability is essential for developing financial responsibility and money management skills, as well as for providing the financial flexibility to engage in wider activities such as leisure, joining different communities, and working on identity development. Thus, a degree of

financial flexibility is necessary to fund other developmental processes associated with adulthood. Moreover, some participants expressed a perspective on what they saw as ‘adult’ versus ‘non-adult’ work, and this was mostly in relation to customer service and hospitality sectors. These sectors were perceived as primarily for young people to help them start earning an income or to fill gaps when experiencing financial difficulties. However, participants believed that engagement in these sectors should decline as individuals grow older:

“I think admin is just like more of an adult job than behind a till. There are people who are older than me who work in customer service roles behind tills and stuff, but I still feel that admin is more of an adult job”. (Jesse, 23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

This finding demonstrates that working in a precarious job market is not a choice that LGBT+ young people want to have to make, as it undermines developing financial independence and having a sense of stability. However, as frequently argued in youth studies, the decline in the youth labour market means that there are increasing levels of young people working in a precarious market, thus this choice is being taken away from them (MacDonald et al., 2001; Heglum and Nilsen, 2024; Furlong, 2017). In the next chapter, I will go on to explore how the pandemic has further affected participants sense of stability with employment.

Participants also expressed different perspectives on the value they place on employment. Some see it just to help with financial independence and so did not express a strong interest for working in specific sectors. In contrast, others stressed the importance of working in particular sectors. With this, they expect to work in a job that they enjoy doing, feel valued and appreciated in, not feeling exploited, and to feel comfortable in their work environment without the anxiety of discrimination. Some participants brought in their gender and/or sexual identity to discuss why they have specific work values or approaches to finding work. For Ollie (20, cisman, gay, interview 1), he talked about having a strong desire to work in the acting and theatre sector after finishing university as “theatre tends to be a ‘be yourself’ kind of space”. Therefore, it is an important field for him

to be confident with how he expresses his sexual identity. Fi also talked about how since coming out as a transgender woman she has become exposed to how wider society perceives gender. Therefore, she does not want to work in a sector that she sees as creating harm for minoritised communities:

“There are a few things that I will absolutely not do under any circumstances. I will not work for the government, anything to do with the military or any company that supplies the military, and I will not work for gambling or anything else I consider to be explicit. My gender identity was a big inspiration for how I ended up here”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

Similarly, for Chloe (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1), she talked about how as a “queer gender non-conforming person, I don’t want to have any risk of discrimination or harassment in the workplace”. This influenced her decision of going self-employed and running her own dog walking business as it is “the greatest job of my working life. [...] A lot of the animals I work with are very affirming, and I don’t have any risk of discrimination or harassment”. This decision was influenced by her coming out as non-binary, followed by her coming out as a transgender woman, as she felt that her previous company was neither accommodating nor accepting of her identity. Therefore, Chloe had already spent a significant amount of time working before her gender identity started to intersect with her work values. On the other hand, for Abbie, as a transgender woman wanting to enter a STEM career after finishing university, she expressed concerns over whether she would be discriminated against and how that would harm her career progression. This was influencing her approach to employment, talking about how she is:

“Looking generally at younger companies, which generally means less security and less pay. I’m kind of assuming that because the company is younger, that the employees skew generally younger and therefore they’re usually more accepting of trans people”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

These findings indicate that an individual’s gender and/or sexual identity continues to influence work values and plans to work in a non-discriminatory sector. Thus, it shows that Bergan-Gander and von Kurthy’s (2006) and Cohler

and Michaels' (2013) findings that LGBT+ people can be selective over employment is still relevant for today's society. By drawing on both Chloe's and Abbie's accounts of how they approach employment, they were both at different stages in their youth transitions when their work values started to develop. Abbie was still at university and had already come out as transgender, while Chloe was already working when she came out and started to develop her work values. Therefore, it indicates that there is more nuance to when work values start to develop and this might intersect with identity development. Depending on when an individual comes out, it might not be during youth transitions that work values start to develop. However, what is particularly interesting about both participants' accounts is that Chloe decided to go self-employed, and Abbie talked about having to accept a financial setback in her approach to work. This raises questions about whether the development of specific work values affects financial stability, indicating a need for further research in this area.

### 5.3.3 Family

Independence from family was emphasised as a significant aspect of independence that participants want to achieve. This sub-theme is about the relationship participants want to have with their family, as no participants had children and none of them expressed wanting to have children as part of their adulthood.

Participants expressed a variety of choices for what relationships they want with their family, thus there is nuance to this level of independence. Their gender and/or sexual identity intersects with why they value having this choice. Some family members are unaccepting or unsupportive of their identity, therefore these participants want complete independence or distance from their parents, and do not want to feel pressured to maintain unhealthy relationships due to societal expectations:

“My mum will devalue my life choices and she is generally argumentative. She’ll try to shoot down my own thoughts, and often makes me feel bad about my body. With family, I don’t put much value in biological family at all. In fact, I put no value in it and I think the fact that we’re so incredibly incentivised to stick with them is harmful as I’ve observed with my own family”. (Fi, 22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

Alternatively, some participants’ parents expressed confusion over their gender and/or sexual identity, and would occasionally misgender or deadname participants. However, participants feel that this does not come from a place of intentional malice. Thus, for these participants, they want to have independence from the family but to be able to maintain a relationship with them on their own terms and conditions:

“Coming out as non-binary has been a learning curve for my mum. She still slips up, she has been using she/her pronouns. But she does try her best and she’s got the name down, she’s getting there. I do want independence from my family, but I do still want to keep a relationship with my mum and brother”. (Jesse, 23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

“My mum and dad being boomers, they have their things every now and then with my sexuality. What is on my mind is having some separation with my family, but deciding as and when I want to be in contact with them”. (Ollie, 20, cisman, gay, interview 1)

Some participants come from supportive families who accept their identity/s. Therefore, while they want independence from their family, they also want to be able to maintain equal, and healthy relationships with them. This is reflected best in James’ account on his relationship with his family:

“My relationship with my parents has changed over the years. They’re still my parents but they’re not like any other person, we are equals really. We can talk freely about anything and support each other mutually. It is a really big part of what family relationships mean to me”. (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1)

These findings relate to what Barras and Jones (2023) argue that parental support is not black or white, and there is a grey space between unconditional support

and no support. Thus, while some LGBT+ young people may come from completely unsupportive families, parental support from others can sometimes be conflicting, confusing and most importantly, inconsistent. However, their intention is to offer affirmative support. How this research has expanded on these findings is that it has illuminated how this difference in level of support can influence the kind of relationships individuals want to have with their families during adulthood.

#### 5.3.4 Living situation

Independent living is the fourth dimension to independence, emphasised as important by all participants. Among the 12 participants, 5 of them were still living at home with their family, 4 participants were in student accommodations (private/halls of residence), and 3 were in private accommodation (renting/home ownership).

Most participants emphasised that they want to avoid having to move back home once they move out, or if they do it will only be temporary to help them work on developing financial independence materially and financially. This is similar to the argument made by Sandberg and colleagues (2015) that young people are now having to make decisions over moving back into the parental home to get ahead financially. Consequently, participants discussed that independent living is a responsibility they have to continuously uphold - paying for bills and rent, and looking after themselves and their living environment. As such, financial independence is a requisite for this.

A range of living situations were discussed as important for what participants want for their adulthood, with not one type being dominant among participants. Some want to be able to purchase their home, some want to rent somewhere with their partner, and some want to permanently live with a close group of friends. For instance, James (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1) strongly emphasised the importance of home ownership as it has been “ingrained into

[him] that mortgage is better than rent”. Therefore, while he discussed that he would consider temporarily renting to work out the ideal location he wants to live, home ownership is the goal. In contrast, Kate lives in a house with other LGBT+ housemates. She explained:

“I’m happy here at the moment, and that’s all I’m thinking about. I can’t really think beyond shared housing. I’ve thought quite a few times it would be great to live with Eva<sup>2</sup>”. (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 3)

This finding demonstrates that LGBT+ young people bring a variety of values to their living situations, and their friendships also feature into this decision-making process. This demonstrates that future research exploring LGBT+ individuals’ living situation should take a comprehensive approach to understanding the diverse household compositions.

For some participants who want to continue living with their friends into adulthood, they discussed that being able to express choice over who to live with is essential. This involves engaging with different situations and people until a stable living situation is established. Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1) talked about how she wants to find herself “situated in a house of friends and engage with living with different people to give me a stable foundation”. This resonates with Arnett’s (2000) theory that living situation is an area of young people’s lives that they are likely to explore the most, engaging with living in different types of housing and with different types of people. This exploration is most likely to occur during university when accommodation is temporary and fixed term, suggesting that stability is achieved post-education. In the following chapter, I will explore how the pandemic has impacted participants expressing this choice.

Participants’ identities of gender and sexuality also intersects with the importance of independent living, as it provides them with a sense of comfort knowing they can be themselves and not have to conceal how they express their identity. Independent living provides a space to explore and experiment with their

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<sup>2</sup> Eva is a close friend of Kate.

identity, and to engage in activities, relationships, and lifestyles that they value. As theorised in D’Augelli’s (1994) ‘life span’ model, how an individual is socially located in wider contexts can influence the extent to which identity is explored and developed. This finding has illuminated how developing independent living as part of youth transitions also impacts identity development. This was emphasised as especially important for Abbie and engaging in polyamory:

“As much as my family might just casually accept my polyamory, I’m not sure how they’d be if I brought around different partners every couple of nights. Not sure how they would take that one”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

## 5.4 Close and supportive networks

Friendships and romantic connections have both been put under this theme due to the similarities in how participants narrated the importance of both these types of relationships. They emphasised importance of the support and guidance they receive, the impact on their sense of self, and the ways in which they maintain these connections.

### 5.4.1 (LGBT+) Friendships

Close and supportive friendships was emphasised as important for who participants want to be surrounded by throughout their adulthood. There was a selective narrative in how participants described the development of their connections. They indicated that they consciously decide who is important to them and who they want to include in their network. For Oscar (28, cisman, gay, interview 1), he talked about how it is important “you know who you want to celebrate your wins in life with, the kind of place where you can find people that you care about”. Participants’ gender and/or sexual identity was an influencing factor in the selective development of their friendship networks. The majority of

participants emphasised that it is important that they are surrounded by people who are affirmative of their identity, have accepting and inclusive views of LGBT+ people, and could be a positive role model in their lives. Because of this, it is unsurprising that the majority of participants expressed the importance of having LGBT+ friends. With LGBT+ friends, participants explained they have less anxiety around deciding how open they can be with their identity as it is expected that they would be entirely accepting, there would be a shared understanding of their identity/s, and a shared experience of becoming adults while navigating wider cis-heteronormative structures. Charlie (18, cisman, gay, interview 1) talked about how having a close LGBT+ friendship is helpful to have “a non-judgemental safe person to go to for advice”. Similarly, Ollie expressed:

“Hanging out with non-queer people, there is always something in the back of your mind of just where is the queer line for you? What’s the border of your knowledge, or your acceptance, or tolerance, or whatever”. (20, cisman, gay, interview 1)

Because of the significance of having likeminded friends, some participants had a friendship network that was exclusively LGBT+, but others also had more of a mixed friendship group. This relates to the concept of ‘linked lives’, which has been theorised as playing an important role in youth transitions (Settersten, 2015; Settersten et al., 2023). It also further adds to what Heckhausen and Buchmann (2019) argue that individuals seek to associate themselves with people who share similar goals or experiences, by demonstrating the selective nature of how LGBT+ young people decide who they want to be surrounded by.

With being selective over who one is friends with, most participants emphasised that quality is better than quantity, and it is more important to have fewer high-quality connections than extensive superficial connections. This is reflected in James’ account of how having a large network makes it harder to suss out people’s views and opinions on him:

“I feel that I can do okay with fewer friends. It’s better to have less shitty friends than a lot of friends and a percentage of them that don’t make you feel okay”. (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1)

This movement from quantity to quality was seen to intersect with other youth transition processes, particularly the movement between different educational fields. For instance, Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1) talked about how during sixth form she had a big group of friends with varying quality of connections. Moving to university, she could engage with a range of different networks in different spaces, and with that she started to narrow down her friendship group and focus on developing close connections with a select few people. Similarly, Josh (18, transman, gay, interview 1) talked about when he moved to university his friendships changed, and he focused more on the friends that were most important to him.

Focusing on quality over quantity, the findings from the analysis resonate with that of Weeks and colleagues (2001) on ‘families of choice’. Participants discussed that it is important they have a reliable and consistent friendship group, whereby connections are stable and constant. Participants also went on to discuss that they want to continue being surrounded by this friendship group throughout their adulthood. This is particularly important to participants, as their friends will often be the first group of people they go to for support (both emotionally and financially) whereby they are treated like equals. To continue receiving that support throughout adulthood is significant. For Abbie, she talked about how:

“You trust your *chosen family* before your blood family. I am fairly certain of where they lie on political issues, and they will be more accepting than my white cis het parents”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

Similarly, Mollie emphasised the stability and tolerance of her friends in her account:

“It’s having stable friends. I have some friends which I’ve been friends with for fucking years, right? I can’t see myself falling out with them anytime soon, I can bother them with my bullshit”. (21, ciswoman, lesbian, interview 1)

However, achieving this consistency and stability is gradual. Participants discussed that connections have to be worked at overtime, personalities need to

be figured out and navigated, and participants have to learn how to be more open with their friends. Therefore, while stability and consistency are the end-goals, working towards that will undergo changes as connections are figured out. This can be seen to centre around what Weeks et al. (2001) call the ‘friendship ethic’, whereby participants are striving towards reaching this quality in connection. However, it requires ongoing commitment and willingness to work on connections and to look out for one another.

This finding further addresses the gap in the literature around whether it is during youth transitions that LGBT+ young people seek to develop and establish families of choice. With participants’ narratives centring around selectivity, quality over quantity, ongoing commitment, it demonstrates that it is during youth transitions that LGBT+ young people start to develop and establish ‘families of choice’. This emerging network serves as an important source of support for their youth transitions and beyond. It further challenges Woodman’s (2012) argument that young people can find it challenging to find regular periods of time to maintain connections, and these can slowly diminish. Instead, as participants are striving to achieve the ‘friendship ethic’, it is important that they overcome these challenges to avoid connections being lost.

#### 5.4.2 Romantic relationships

While perspectives on the values of friendships did not differ significantly among participants other than if their friendship group is exclusively LGBT+ or not, there was a difference in perspective that participants placed on relationships.

Engagement with romantic relationships was not discussed as exclusively monogamous. Polyamory<sup>3</sup> is a type of approach to relationships that some participants value engaging with for their adulthood. Participants discussed that engaging with polyamorous relationships is a gradual process, like with

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<sup>3</sup> Polyamory is the practice of engaging in multiple romantic relationships simultaneously with the consent and knowledge of everyone involved.

friendships, wherein effective communication with partners and a mutual understanding of what people want from the relationship is essential to making polyamory work. Wosick-Correa's (2010) concept of 'agentic fidelity' is applicable to this finding. Polyamorists engage in agentic fidelity by exercising personal agency and emphasising a chosen loyalty through knowing what rules to establish. They must also determine when and how to follow these rules and engage in open communication with partners to renegotiate them as circumstances evolve. Consequently, values such as responsibility, honesty, clear communication, and ethical behaviour are essential to the practice of polyamory (ibid.).

With polyamory, close connections are established with participants' partners, with some participants discussing that partners will quite often know each other and may also be involved in a polyamorous relationship together. Thus, connections in polyamory can overlap. For instance, Ollie (20, cisman, gay, interview 1) talked about how quite often he will go on a night out with his partners together as they all know each other and get on well together. There is also a clear link to how polyamory helps with identity development, as participants can learn more about how they want to engage with romance and sex. Thus, they are also learning more about their sexuality, their body, and they develop more comfort with themselves. For instance, Abbie talked about the importance of polyamory for developing confidence in her transgender body:

“Engaging with polyamory it helps with not being afraid of being seen with being trans. Being trans there's a lot of fear of being seen naked by other people. [...] Knowing my partners find me pretty has been a big confidence thing for me. I've been getting more confident in the way I look”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

This finding touches upon D'Augelli's (1994) life span model which argues that identity development involves both developing a personal identity and intimacy status. It demonstrates that while these two developments are treated as two separate stages in developing an identity, they also interact with each other. In Abbie's case, engaging in polyamory and developing an intimacy status has been

important to developing confident thoughts, feelings and desires in relation to her body. Through polyamory, she has also developed more confidence to approach new partners and intimately engage with them. Developing an affirmative personal identity is especially important for developing an intimacy status, in particular for transgender people. Queer theory is useful to further elaborate on the reasons behind this significance. Butler (2006, p. 23) argues that the organisation of gender and sexuality in society is about “a coherence between sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire”. According to Ahmed (2006), it is during intimacy where we become aware of our gendered and sexed body in relation to other bodies. However, when bodies and practices deviate in one way or another from this normative structure, it can lead to a disorientation in our surroundings, and we might come to question the possibility of engaging in intimacy again. For Abbie, she talks about being afraid of being seen as a transwoman while being intimate. However, with engaging in polyamory and having affirmative partners it has allowed her to become more confident in her identity and to approach intimacy more confidently.

In relation to monogamous relationships, some participants value marriage as a marker of adulthood. In contrast, others placed no value on marriage but want to have a stable, monogamous relationship. Interestingly, there was an age dimension to this, with older participants valuing marriage more than younger participants. For instance, Oscar (28, cisman, gay, interview 1) talked about how he “knew” he wanted to get married, and he valued his marriage with his husband for the support he provides him. Whereas Jesse (23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how they are also in a stable relationship, but never regarded themselves as “one of those people who dreams of getting married”. This might indicate that there could be a generational shift occurring on the value of marriage among LGBT+ people, with the equalising of marriage law now resulting in marriage being presented as a ‘choice’ that people can decide if they engage with or not (Clarke et al., 2018). However, understanding this was beyond the scope of this project, and is an area for further research.

Despite the different approaches to romantic relationships, a common theme among the majority of participants' accounts is that relationships serve as an important source of support, providing levels of support comparable to those found in friendships. Consequently, equality is a significant value that the majority of participants place on relationships, and demonstrates that Weeks and colleagues' (2001) finding that seeking an egalitarian relationship continues to be relevant for today's LGBT+ young people. Equality in relationships involves providing and receiving equal amounts of support and care, ensuring that this balance remains constant during significant changes. Additionally, there should be little to no unequal dependency on partners for resources, with emotional and intimate investments being equally shared by all involved. For Oscar, he talked about what equality in his marriage looks like:

“We do a lot of things together. We will mess around playing video games together because they're a shared interest. We will go to various cultural things in Manchester, and see people perform a lot. He's a good person, he's sweet, and he's the only person who's ever actually bothered to care about me rather than just fulfilling whatever obligation society expects”. (28, cisman, gay, interview 1)

For transgender participants, it is important they are in a relationship with someone who is supportive and affirmative of their gender identity, both at an emotional and intimate level. This is reflected strongly in Jesse's account of their partner:

“He's only known me with they/them pronouns so it's a lot easier for him and for me, there's no potential slip-ups which is very much gender dysphoria is not on my mind”. (23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

## 5.5 Engagement with inclusive communities

This adulthood marker takes on a spatial, cultural, and social dimension, focusing on the physical spaces participants want to engage with, how these spaces socially and culturally help with their youth transitions, and why ongoing

participation in these spaces is also significant for their adulthood. This marker has been called ‘inclusive’ because, while engaging with LGBT+ communities is a significant aspect, participants also identified other equally important spaces that are not exclusively LGBT+ but are inclusive and accepting of their identity. Furthermore, as will be explored in Chapter 7 ‘Re-appreciation for friendship and community’, changes to LGBT+ communities can have an impact on participants’ sense of self and connection to local spaces, communities, and networks. Consequently, I have applied Formby’s (2017) advice here that the idea of a plurality of (LGBT+) communities is more valuable for research, as it accounts for the nuance in experience and avoids assuming an LGBT+ community is one homogenous entity. In accordance with this, there are three sub-themes to this theme of adulthood: LGBT+ communities, alternative communities, and space and place.

### 5.5.1 LGBT+ communities

A range of physical spaces were discussed as important for accessing LGBT+ communities that do not centre exclusively around the night-time economy. LGBT+ cafés and specific support-based societies, along with bars and clubs, were discussed as important spaces participants want to engage with. For instance, James (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how he does “a lot of gay clubbing” and he wants to continue engaging with this into adulthood. In contrast, Oscar (28, cisman, gay, interview 1) talked about how going to a gay bar or club is “not my thing”, but he and his husband attend LGBT+ reading groups together. Jesse talked about how they joined a local LGBT+ support group that:

“Actively goes out of the way to give therapy to the community. A lot of the time we had like group activities, so you could also find other people who were going through similar things”. (23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, some participants have a sense of difference when it comes to becoming an adult, feeling alone and unguided for developing

an adult narrative. Engaging with LGBT+ communities, and the social and cultural resources they provide, was discussed as an important biographical field that helps with making progress on these shortfalls. Interacting with other LGBT+ adults was discussed as an important social resource for getting real-life examples of what LGBT+ adult identities can look like, and how to achieve them. This is discussed as particularly important for Aspen and for how they perceive the importance of social interactions:

“A lot of your understanding of yourself comes through interactions with others. You can’t just sit alone and isolated and think that you’re gonna have all of the breakthroughs come into understanding yourself”. (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

Participants who were already part of these spaces before the pandemic described a shared understanding among others about everyday lived experiences. Consequently, this creates a sense of acceptance, allowing them to feel comfortable and safe in authentically expressing themselves in these spaces. They also emphasised that a key aspect of these spaces is the diversity in both age and identity of those who engage in them. This diversity contributes to a feeling of heritage, history, and inclusivity within the community, deepening their sense of belonging. This finding relates to Westrate et al.’s (2024) argument that LGBT+ communities are likely to have an egalitarian generational structure based on who else is also part of those spaces. This study has highlighted the importance of this generational diversity for individuals’ youth transitions. Participants expressed that the combination of generational similarity and heterogeneity is a particularly important social resource, helping them imagine and understand alternative futures. This was the case for Fi, where she reflected on the interactions she has in LGBT+ spaces:

“I think they’re excellent for reflection and outside views on how I’m doing, what I’m doing. It means that to an extent, because I have less experience, I get more of a view of what ways of living, ways of being independent and lifestyles you like that the people I know are demonstrating that you can or can’t adopt”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

Some participants also discussed that being in LGBT+ spaces are particularly important for expanding their social networks and making new friends with likeminded others. Furthermore, some discussed that LGBT+ spaces are a safe space for engaging in new romantic and/or sexual relationships, as there is less of a risk for receiving negative and harmful backlash. Abbie (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how she can engage and explore her sexuality a lot more in these spaces without additional complications, “I can sleep around and be gay. I don’t think it’s that complicated trying a lot of different things in queer contexts”. This finding relates to Formby’s (2017) argument that LGBT+ spaces are important for people to facilitate sexual, romantic, or friendly contacts with others, and they are safe spaces to facilitate safe displays of physical affection. It further illustrates why these spaces are essential for navigating other youth transitions related to building close connections and exploring identity.

Participants also discussed LGBT+ communities as providing an important cultural resource that support their youth transitions. The way participants described the cultural significance of these spaces aligns with Halberstam’s (2003, 2005) theory on ‘queer sub-culture’. It is in these spaces that participants feel cis-heteronormative structures are absent as there is a shared commitment among others to not uphold these harmful structures in these spaces. By escaping from these wider structures, participants discussed that they feel their youth transitions are not seen as deviant by others. This, in-turn, re-affirms their adult identities and gives them a sense of progress, allowing them to navigate their youth transitions at their own desired direction and pace. It also gives participants the confidence to be themselves and develop a sense of joy in their identity/s. This was the case for Kate:

“You’re around other people that have, more than the standard average person in the country, gone outside those norms in terms of age and development and stuff. It just means you’re more content to explore these things”. (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 3)

Kate's account of being surrounded by people who have pursued different youth transitions, and "gone outside" the norms touch upon Halberstam's (2003, 2005) theory on queer use of time and space. In these spaces, the switching of temporalities becomes visible and can be experienced firsthand. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, participants emphasised the important of prioritising and reclaiming the uniqueness of their adult subjectivities and pursuing their identified adult identities. LGBT+ communities are an important resource for working on that in terms of how these spaces culturally position themselves against wider cis-heteronormative structures. By doing so, this finding also offers the bridge between culture, structure, and agency that MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) call for. It also theoretically demonstrates that engaging in subcultures as intentional and reflexive strategies to grapple with personal and collective challenges is still relevant for today's society (Hodkinson, 2016).

Participants also discussed that engaging with LGBT+ communities is something that they want to continue engaging with into adulthood and beyond, as these spaces provide a sense of acceptance, an escape from wider structures, and access to social support. This was the case for Kate:

"These are a really fundamental aspect of my life that I don't see ever changing. I don't want to be in a situation where that's not important to me anymore, engaging with queer people I think that's just going to be natural for me, they're part of the fabric of my life". (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 3)

This finding further challenges Krzaklewska and Cuzzocrea's (2024) concept of 'oasis of youth', which treats engagement in culture and leisure (being youth), and youth transitions (becoming adult) as distinct processes. First, this section has demonstrated that community engagement not only interacts with but also facilitates the process of becoming, helping participants gain an understanding of their adulthood. Secondly, it demonstrates that engagement in these spaces does not end with youth. Therefore, sub-cultural theory should not just be understood in relation to young people; a broader understanding of its importance during adulthood should also be considered (Taylor, 2010b).

Halberstam (2003, 2005) supports this perspective by discussing how LGBT+ adults engage in queer subcultures throughout their lives. They argue that many LGBT+ individuals refuse cis-heteronormative expectations of adulthood, thereby prolonging their periods of their lives devoted to subcultural participation. Consequently, queer subculture should be recognised as a fundamental aspect of adulthood for LGBT+ individuals.

### 5.5.2 Alternative communities

This sub-theme focuses on participating in general leisure activities that have a community aspect but are not exclusively LGBT+. These activities include engaging in music and cultural events, participating in sports, activism, or travelling to new locations. These activities provide socially and culturally important resources for their youth transitions that allow participants to escape from wider, everyday stressors. As such, participants discussed that as part of their adulthood they want to have an even balance of engaging with both an inclusive activity related to their interests, and engage in exclusive LGBT+ communities. Furthermore, what is notable about this finding is that these activities are not inherently centred around the night-time economy or drinking and alcohol culture; instead, they are diverse and mixed in nature. As Fenton and colleagues (2023) found in their study on university students, the value that young people place on binge drinking has declined, and abstinence from alcohol is starting to replace that culture. Thus, Fenton et al.'s (2023) findings, along with those of this study, highlight the need for youth studies to continue developing a broadened understanding of what types of leisure young people engage in beyond the traditional night-time economy.

Participants' gender and/or sexual identities were recognised as intersecting with this sub-theme, contributing to its significance in relation to their adulthood. Some participants discussed that some of the sporting hobbies they take part in offer important social and cultural resources because others who engage in

these activities are supportive of their identity/s, and cis-heteronormative values are not embedded in the culture of these activities. For instance, Aspen (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) contrasted climbing to rugby, talking about how, overtime, climbing has become more important to them as it is not inherently gendered like rugby. Similarly, in relation to engaging in activism, participants discussed that activism frequently draws in other LGBT+ people as the nature of it is about challenging and dismantling harmful structures that affect diverse communities, including LGBT+ people. This was the case for Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1), as she talked about how the activism she engages in draws in similar people who have lived the same as her and “occupy the same position that I do”. This allows her to feel “safe” in those spaces, and to make closer connections with others. Additionally, regarding travel, participants emphasised the importance of visiting new destinations that are inclusive of LGBT+ individuals, as these places offer cultural and social opportunities to connect with new people, explore community spaces, and broaden their social networks. James (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how before the pandemic he travelled to various European destinations and to major UK cities that had an LGBT+ presence.

Participants’ emphasis on the importance of engaging in these leisure activities has some relevance with post-subcultural theory, as they focus on specific activities and inclusive values. However, these activities are not explicitly situated against dominant cis-heteronormative structures, nor are they focused around particular identities like LGBT+ communities (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). Engaging in inclusive communities were discussed as important aspects of participants’ adult identities that they wish to continue participating in during adulthood. Thus, such engagement serves as a means of investing in their adult identities (Henderson et al., 2007). In the above section I argue that subcultural theory remains relevant for understanding the significance of LGBT+ youth transitions. However, this finding also demonstrates that post-subcultural theory can also offer valuable insights into understanding youth transitions.

### 5.5.3 Space and place

Participants emphasised the importance of where they live for unlocking access to the important social and cultural resources identified above. Participants largely discussed the importance of living somewhere central that provides them with an even balance of accessing LGBT+ communities, and plentiful opportunities to try out and engage with other, more inclusive forms of leisure. As such, importance was placed on living in urban spaces, near major cities, where more social and cultural opportunities are on offer, and residents have more liberal attitudes. For instance, Aspen (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) talked about their current rural location, describing it as an “older conservative town” where people are “violent”, and how they are “a known face so people know me and any change or any diversion from their expectations is seen as a lot of more transgression [sic]”.

The above finding is not surprising, as research has commonly shown that living in rural areas can pose challenges in accessing visible forms of LGBT+ communities. Such areas often have limited access to specific support groups and tend to foster more openly stigmatising social climates (Formby, 2017; Marlin et al., 2023). By understanding this finding through a youth transitions lens, this research has illuminated how engaging in inclusive communities intersects with the other adulthood marker of independence. For instance, Aspen (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) placed importance on employment and developing enough financial independence to be able to move away to an urban area. Similarly, Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1) talked about how her current area has limited opportunities to engage in activism. Therefore, when she finishes university she wants to search for work in major UK cities that have more opportunities to engage in different forms of activism. Josh (18, transman, gay, interview 1) talked about the importance of selecting a university in a big city where he knew it would be safe for transgender people, and there were opportunities to engage with LGBT+ communities.

## 5.6 Thriving in identity

This theme is specifically about participants' gender and/or sexual identity, and was emphasised by *all* participants. There are two processes involved with thriving which have been generated as sub-themes, and they relate to (1) how thriving is worked towards and (2) what it feels like.

This theme is called 'thriving' for several reasons, informed both by participants' narratives and wider literature. Wagaman et al. (2016) found a similar theme in their study on LGBT+ youth in the US. However, they called the theme 'self-preservation', and focused more on cis-heteronormative structures rather than the sense of joy and confidence participants had in their identity/s. By calling it preservation, or resilience, it obscures the reality that LGBT+ young people very often develop a joy in their identity/s. Instead, it homogenises LGBT+ young people's lives as misery or of being a struggle. The theme of thriving is not meant to dispute that navigating wider cis-heteronormative structures is no longer necessary for LGBT+ young people. I am certainly not making any claims that efforts in research, practice, activism, social change, or political action should not continue to dismantle these harmful structures. Indeed, participants discussed that what feeds into thriving is preserving themselves against cis-heteronormative structures, but it is just one piece that makes up this process. Participants' narratives strongly conveyed that they place greater value on feeling confident in their identity/s and not having to conceal parts of themselves. By embracing their authentic selves, participants expressed they can approach other developmental processes with greater confidence. For Oscar (28, cisman, gay, interview 1), thriving in identity is about "being able to live a life that you're happy and content living". Similarly, Aspen expressed it is about:

"Not giving a shit. If I can't just be completely, stupidly, bluntly myself around somebody, I'm not going to enjoy my time around them so who's missing out on it?". (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

More importantly, participants felt that they would be able to get to this stage of thriving in their identity. Understanding who they are and what their identity/s are is the first step to thriving:

“Coming out as trans has been the most liberating time of my life. The joy is definitely bigger than the fear”. (Chloe, 30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

“When I believed I was a man, manly man boy, I was not happy, not happy at all. There was no joy in my life. Coming out as non-binary there is joy in my life and things are great”. (Aspen, 20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

“Whatever your gender identity, sexuality, you need to own that” (Oscar, 28, cisman, gay, interview 1)

“If I didn’t discover I was trans, I was not going to be a complete person” (Abbie, 22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

Thus, this finding responds to Press and Lewis’ (2024) call that narratives on gender and/or sexual identity should be flipped to one that emphasises joy, while also keeping in mind wider structural factors. This also challenges the argument made by Cohler and Michaels (2013) and Savin-Williams (2005) that sexual identity has lost its significance as the master narrative for lesbian and gay young people. As argued throughout this chapter, participants referenced their gender and/or sexual identity when discussing what adulthood means to them. They emphasised that their identity/s is a significant feature to their adult narrative and influences how they approach other aspects of adult life and identities.

### 5.6.1 The path to thriving

Participants discussed that developing joy and confidence in their identity/s initially involves navigating broader cis-heteronormative structures and getting to a point where they no longer impact on their sense of self. For instance, in Chloe’s account, she talked about when she initially started to think about her gender identity as being non-binary, she became exposed to how wider structures are

based on there being an inherent link between sex and gender. She further explained how this connection is embedded and reinforced through the everyday interactions and spaces she engages with:

“I did start to notice and pick up on things that I maybe hadn’t done before in the way that people talk about other people that are different to them, or the level of assumption into who people are. [...] It’s made me realise how obsessively gendered everything is, especially in public toilets. [...] Trying to explore who I am in such a binary gendered environment is difficult”. (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

She further explained that, through navigating these structures, she realised that these expectations are social constructs and there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to express gender. This understanding has helped her to move forward in exploring and deepening her understanding her gender identity:

“A big part of being an adult is learning that a lot of those boundaries are not meaningless but arbitrary. They don’t need to be there, certainly in cases of gender binary. [...] How you interact with that I think shows a lot about the type of adult you are, whether its blissful ignorance or something that’s quite important”. (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

Participants also discussed that to thrive in identity, it involves developing a clearer understanding of who they are, what their identity/s mean to them, how they want to present and express these identity/s, and, for some, how they approach intimacy. Thus, participants talked about going through the process associated with D’Augelli’s (1994) life span model of initially developing an affirmed personal identity in relation to their thoughts, feelings, and desires. To develop this understanding, most participants talked about how they reach out to LGBT+ communities, either in person or online, depending on how supportive their living environment is, to discuss identity-related topics with other LGBT+ individuals. As such, while they develop a personal identity, they are also working on developing a social identity by identifying communities and networks of people to assimilate with in order to help with their process of developing an affirmed personal identity (D’Augelli, 1994). This discovery of themselves does

not have a clear endpoint. There was a fluid nature to how some participants narrated their exploration of identity, as they continually learn more about their self-perceptions and consider other identities. This fluid nature was not seen as problematic, and participants enjoyed the process of discovering new aspects of themselves. For instance, Josh (18, transman, gay, interview 1) first came out as bisexual before he came out as a transman. When he came out as transgender, he started to think about his sexuality again and realised he was gay. For Kate (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1), she first came out as a transwoman and with that started to think about her sexuality, considering whether she is bisexual or pansexual. This relates to arguments made by queer theorists that identity development is an ongoing social process marked by multiplicity, instability, and flux and can shift at different times depending on what happens in an individual's life (Butler, 1990; Green, 2007). The process to thriving is a diverse experience and is not a uniform process that applies to all LGBT+ people. By taking a qualitative longitudinal approach, this research has been able to capture this fluidity effectively.

The wider environment participants are socially located in is a significant factor for how they approach discovering themselves. Participants discussed that it is important to be in a safe and comfortable environment where they can learn more about themselves, experiment with their expressions, engage in intimacy, access a support network, and have open conversations about their feelings. Thus, a clear link can be identified between independence and identity development, as it provides opportunities for self-discovery, with participants having different experiences of this process. For instance, when James (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1) moved out of his family home for university, it was a time when he started thinking about his sexuality. He was able to access LGBT+ societies, interact with members belonging to those spaces, and learn more about himself. Whereas for Chloe (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1), who had also been to university, she came from an unsupportive home with parents who strictly policed how she presented herself. Therefore, it was not until she moved out and started living with her wife that she had the space and support to

consider her gender identity and how she wanted to express herself. She came out as non-binary and eventually as a transwoman in her late 20's, further indicating that the path for discovering oneself is not standard for all LGBT+ young people and can occur at different ages.

Specific to transgender participants, they discussed that gender transitions<sup>4</sup> are important for developing confidence in their gender identity and they want this to be a positive, stable, and consistent process. All participants who identified as transgender discussed that their social transitions involve a relational level, whereby experimenting with their gendered expressions involves getting advice and feedback from friends and partners if they are supportive of their identity. Getting this advice is particularly important, as participants discussed there is very little guidance elsewhere on how they can present their gender as a transgender person. Consequently, participants are also developing a social identity when coming out to their close networks, using these networks to affirm their identity (D'Augelli, 1994). Butler's (1990, 2006) gender theory is useful in understanding why developing a social identity is important for participants in building confidence in their gender identity. The social environment essentialises social identity by enforcing individuals to conform to gender identity expectations. Therefore, for a transgender person's gender identity to be socially accepted, it must not be seen to break cisgendered assumptions. Getting advice and feedback from others is necessary to ensure they are doing this well, further indicating why the social location of an individual in respect to the adulthood markers like 'access to inclusive communities' and 'close and supportive networks' is important for 'thriving in identity'.

The above finding is also interesting for thinking about previous arguments made in this chapter regarding how LGBT+ young people resist or challenge the cis-heteronormative expectations of adulthood. Experiencing misgendering can lead individuals into a state of dysphoric despair, which is significantly detrimental to individuals' sense of confidence and self-esteem (Rood et al., 2017). Gender

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<sup>4</sup> This includes social, medical, and legal transitions.

affirmation plays a crucial role in fostering feelings of safety and promoting positive wellbeing, which influences how individuals engage with the broader social world (ibid.). It could be that transgender participants perceive the rejection of cis-heteronormative adulthood expectations as having less of a significant impact on their self-perception and mental health compared to the rejection of cisgender norms regarding gender expression.

Furthermore, with medical transitions, participants discussed that they want this to be a consistent and efficient process. They do not want to have to wait long to receive gender affirmative medication or have inconsistent breaks in their prescription, and they want to continue receiving it from the same place. This was seen as essential for them to be able to work on developing confidence in their gender identity, and pass as the gender they self-identify with. For participants who had begun their medical transitions by the time of the first interview, they initially approached the NHS Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) for financial reasons, but to also go to a safe prescriber where they could receive accurate guidance. However, participants also talked about how approaching their NHS GP required prior research, and some discussed they would talk to other transgender people in their local area to understand their experiences of approaching their local GP. This was so they felt their needs would be taken seriously, and their GP had some familiarity with the GIC referral process, before approaching their GP. This relates to what Wright and colleagues (2021) found that there is a postcode lottery to accessing NHS gender affirmative care, and not all GPs are at the same level of understanding when it comes to transgender healthcare. It means that for transgender young people, they must exert more agency than necessary to work out where they can receive the quality of healthcare they deserve and that will allow them to invest in their gender identity. This finding is also interesting for thinking about the social contract between the state and citizens and the exercising of citizenship rights. Participants emphasised the importance of the social contract between the national healthcare system and their rights as citizens to be able to access state healthcare for their medical transitions and to have control over their bodies (Plummer, 2005). However, there was an

underlying expectation that this social contract would not be as straightforward and accessible, which further emphasised their sense of difference regarding youth transitions.

Participants' accounts clearly indicate a significant difference in their opportunities to access an affirmative GP, which can be seen to be linked to their social location regarding independence. For instance, participants who had moved to university had the option of either sticking with their home GP or moving to the GP in their university location, depending on the quality in the different areas. This was the case for Josh (18, transman, gay, interview 1), who talked about how he struck lucky with his home GP who is a "very big trans ally". Consequently, he made the decision to stay with that GP when he moved to university. However, Aspen (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1), who was still living at home, had a very different experience with their GP. They shared that their GP has been slow in taking blood tests, prescribing medication, and updating their records. Moreover, they felt geographically and financially limited to sticking with the NHS, as being unemployed means that private healthcare is not an "option".

Participants also expressed different needs in what they want from medical transitions. For Jesse (23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1), they want microdosing for altering facial features so they appear more androgynous. For Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1), she just wants to take hormone therapy to change her facial features. Whereas both Abbie (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 2) and Josh (18, transman, gay, interview 1) emphasised the importance of hormone therapy and sex-reassignment surgery. As such, medical transition is a varied process and people approach it differently (Hines, 2006). It also expands on the argument, through a diverse gender lens, that youth transitions are now increasingly unstandardised and less predictable (Badolato, 2023; Thomson et al., 2002). For transgender young people, they are likely to approach their youth transitions with a range of expectations for how they want to develop their gender identity, and this diversity needs to be accounted for.

## 5.6.2 Being oneself

Thriving involves feeling confident and comfortable in themselves. It involves being open with their identity in the different spaces they belong to, not feeling that they must conceal parts of who they are in those spaces and with who they interact with. For instance, Oscar likened denial in his sexuality as being non-adult:

“If I were in the closet then I wouldn’t be an adult. If I were having to play straight to you then I wouldn’t be being grown up. It would still be some kind of, I don’t want to say childish, but it suggests a certain level of not coming to terms with who you are as a person”. (28, cisman, gay, interview 1)

Thriving also takes on an embodied dimension and is not a finding that is exclusive to transgender participants. For instance, Ollie (20, interview 1) who identifies as gay and a cisgender male discussed how having confidence in his body means he is being able to experiment with how he expresses his gender that does not conform to hegemonic masculinity, and to not have to worry about his sexuality being perceived in a negative way. He talked about when he goes on a night out with his friends, “I always want to go and wear my heels”. With this, the spaces he interacts with are important. He discussed how going to LGBT+ bars and clubs in a location that is inclusive for LGBT+ people are essential for him, as he does not want to “get beaten up for being gay, that scares me”. This relates to Butler’s (1990, 2006) theory that the organisation of gender and sexuality in society depends on relations of coherence between the two, and there is a complex relationship between the two. Sexual orientations are seen as referring to certain kinds of gendered bodies, and how gender is expressed can produce an effect that reads as sexuality. For Ollie, he is aware that how he expresses his gender through wearing heels is likely to produce an affect that makes others read him as gay, but he wants to feel confident and safe doing so.

For transgender participants, thriving in their body involves feeling comfortable with their bodies and confident that their gender expressions match to the gender

they self-identify with, and are perceived as such by others. Thus, it is about having the confidence to consistently express their gender in the way they want to, and not let other people's opinions and perceptions hinder them from this. This aligns with the theory proposed by Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull (2019) that coming out as transgender is an external, ongoing, and socially situated process. While LGB+ individuals may also employ 'strategic outness' to control information surrounding their sexual identity (Schmitz and Tyler, 2018c), transgender individuals face greater public scrutiny surrounding gender expression and the policing of gender expectations (Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull, 2019). This scrutiny can hinder their ability to strategically manage their identities in ways that promote wellbeing. Consequently, transgender people often do not simply come out and stay out. Rather, they make strategic decisions regarding how they express their gender based on specific social contexts. However, for participants in this study, they talked about how thriving in their identity is moving beyond having to make strategic decisions with their gender expressions to confidently expressing their gender in all social contexts. This was the case for Kate who talked about the way she dresses:

"I want to dress in a confident way. If I'm playing a bit safe with how I dress, I'm not really thinking about what feels good to me, or comfortable. In turn, my confidence is quite bad when I'm not dressing how I want to. It's important to me that I don't hide who I am and how I want to present myself". (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

Not all transgender participants wanted to stick to one way of expressing their gender. For instance, Aspen (20, bisexual, interview 1), who is non-binary, discussed that feeling confident in their body is about feeling comfortable expressing their gender in multiple ways and having the confidence to engage with feminine and androgynous presentations. This connects to Hines' (2006) theory that there are multiple variations of gender identities and expressions that extend beyond a binary understanding of gender. For Aspen, thriving in their identity is about having the confidence to be flexible with how they express their gender that is not firmly placed on one end or the other of the gender spectrum.

Participants also emphasised that thriving in identity is crucial because it influences how they approach other adult identities they wish to claim, as well as how those identities, in turn, contribute to their overall sense of thriving. Therefore, while this finding addresses the gap identified by Wagaman (2016) that little is known about how gender and/or sexual identity influences how other adult identities are approached, it also introduces a new perspective by highlighting that there is a two-way relationship between thriving and other adult identities. To start with how thriving influences how other adult identities are approached, participants discussed that thriving in identity is important for feeling competent approaching new biographical fields such as education, employment, and living situation. For instance, Abbie (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how struggling and having anxiety with her transgender identity “does not stop you from being an adult, it just makes it harder. It’s a block of job prospects”. She emphasised the importance of feeling confident that she passes as a woman so that it will not affect how she is perceived in job interviews, thereby not hindering her opportunities of securing the career she wants. In this context, consistent medical transition is an important resource for providing Abbie with embodied capital. Similarly, in relation to interpersonal relationships, thriving in identity is important for being selective over who one is friends with, and to have confidence approaching new sexual and intimate encounters. For instance, Kate emphasised the difference she feels between her gender expressions and her sexed body when it comes to intimacy, touching upon how confidence in her sexed body is essential for approaching intimacy:

“Although I feel quite confident with how I look and present, when it comes to taking the layers of presentation off I am still really, really nervous about that point. It just makes me feel like fuck, can I do it? I don’t want to be terrified of sex”. (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 3)

Here, Kate is drawing upon Press and Lewis’ (2024) theory that thriving in identity can be dynamic when facing new experiences. For her, approaching intimacy as part of her adult identity is about feeling confident in her sexed body more so than her gender expressions. This relates to the argument made earlier in this chapter

in relation to romantic relationships for how intimacy and identity are related to each other. As argued by Ahmed (2006), it is during intimacy where we become aware of our gendered and sexed body in relation to other bodies, and when the socially constructed coherence between gender and sex is broken it can impact how confidently people approach intimacy. For Kate, thriving in her sexed body, despite knowing she is deviating from these social constructions and knowing others will see that too, is important for her ability to engage in intimate relationships.

These findings capture something important about how gender and/or sexual identity affects how other youth transitions are approached. As argued in the literature review, studies have mostly focused on how access to social, cultural, and material resources can influence an individual's sense of competency, how adult identities are approached, and what adult identities are invested in. However, this has mostly been understood from a social class lens and through the application of Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of field, capital, and habitus. This study has placed sexuality and diverse gender identities at the centre to uncover how these factors also influence individuals' sense of competency and the ways they approach and invest in adult identities. Consequently, this research theoretically expands on Henderson et al.'s (2007) work on competencies and investments, illustrating how thriving in gender and sexual identities also provide a foundational sense of competency for approaching other biographical fields, thereby enabling other adult identities to be invested in.

Participants also discussed that their social location in other biographical fields is also important for developing confidence in their identity. As alluded to throughout this chapter, an individual's social location regarding independence, access to inclusive communities, and close and supportive connections are important adult identities by their very nature. These adult identities also significantly contribute to fostering a positive sense of self in relation to their gender and/or sexual identity. Therefore, these findings challenge Press and Lewis' (2024) claim that thriving and stability in identity are prerequisites for transitioning to adulthood. This research suggests that thriving develops

alongside youth transitions and is influenced by the social locations individuals find themselves in.

## 5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed four markers of adulthood identified as relevant to LGBT+ young people's adult identities. A key finding from this chapter is that participants' minoritised identities of gender and sexuality profoundly influence their transition to adulthood, shaped by prevailing cis-heteronormative expectations of adulthood. Consequently, these four markers of adulthood provide necessary material, cultural, and social resources that facilitate the development of adult identities. Moreover, each adulthood marker is interconnected, meaning that progress in one marker can impact the processes associated with others.

This chapter also highlights that becoming an adult is a complex biographical process that individuals go through, and can be highly stressful depending on what is(not) happening in their lives. When the wider social context is considered, and what social changes are happening, this can add to an even more stressful process to becoming an adult. This study sought to explore how the pandemic might be continuing to shape the process to becoming an adult, and reaching the adulthood markers discussed in this chapter. It is in the following three chapters that the following two research questions are explored.

# Chapter 6 - The critical moment(s) of lockdown(s)

## 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I explore why 'independence' is a significant marker of adulthood for LGBT+ young people and how participants want this process to go. In this chapter I focus specifically on how the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s) continues to impact this process to independence, making the argument that it has become a turning point for some in terms of how it continues to be revisited, worked and reworked in a post-pandemic society. In Chapter 3, I go into more detail on how 'critical moments' has been theoretically defined and how it is being used for this research. However, to provide some brief context on how it is being used in this chapter, critical moments have been understood as being placed on a continuum between 'fateful' moments (Giddens, 1991) and 'fatalistic' moments (Thomson et al., 2002), and has been understood as a continuum between structure and agency. Holland and Thomson (2009) make a distinction between critical moments and turning points. While critical moments capture something about how they have been responded to and just offer one part of the story, turning points is more longitudinal in its interpretation in relation to its impacts on the life as lived. This chapter will engage with these concepts for unpacking the significance of the lockdown(s) for developing independence.

This chapter has been split into three sections and focuses respectively on the biographical fields of education, employment, and living situation as these are the fields that feature most clearly for the markers of independence. Throughout data collection and analysis, a relationship could be seen with the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s) having a significant impact on each of the three biographical fields. This warranted a specific focus on further exploring why it was a significant moment, informed by a youth transitions theoretical approach

underpinning this research (MacDonald et al., 2001; Settersten and Thogmartin, 2018). Throughout this chapter, the focus is not only on the first lockdown (out of three) that happened in England because for some participants either it was the second or third lockdown that had the most impact on them, or all three lockdowns coalesced with each other.

Both sections on education and living situation have been structured in a similar way to each other. Firstly, they focus on the initial impacts of the lockdown(s) for how they changed participants' environments and the opportunities they had access to. Secondly, they examine how those changes have continued to affect participants in a post-pandemic society, including shifts in participants' meaning structures and perspectives on these fields have been altered, as well as their navigation of these changes. It is in these sections that individual case histories will be presented and explored in-depth. For the section employment, two case studies will be brought in to explore the structural differences in terms of how employment was impacted. In the methodology chapter, I argued that while each participant's life is unique and complex, the cases selected for this chapter reflect a pattern within the broader data of shared experiences of the pandemic and comparable resources to draw on. Each case history points to a significant aspect of the adulthood marker 'independence'. This approach has allowed for a specific and detailed analysis. Thus, by being able to revisit participants and biographically interview them, this has allowed to focus on change and continuity in participants' lives, combining their retrospective and prospective perspectives to explore the interchange between critical moments and turning points. Taking a qualitative longitudinal approach worked well in comprehensively capturing data to answer my research questions, and allowing a reflexive process of reconsidering and reinterpreting the meaning of the data and analysis.

## 6.2 Education

This section focuses primarily on the initial move to online learning for schools and universities that came from the introduction of the first lockdown (March 2020). During interviews, participants focused mainly on the first lockdown for how it impacted their education, as it was when significant changes occurred in their mode of learning and required significant adaptation on the participant's behalf. The second move to online learning (December 2020) required less of an adaptation. Participants exercised differing degrees of agency in their move to online learning, with data analysis indicating that wider relational and institutional responses were interacting with this level of self in creating a difference in experience. I take Erikson and colleagues' (2024) advice on board throughout this section that to grasp why experiences of the pandemic were different, there needs to be a consideration of the changing nature of resources individuals had access to. This avoids pinpointing responsibility on the individual and takes more of an ecological approach. The section will then move onto exploring Abbie's case history which illustrates her 'downward spiral to resignation', arguing that the transition to online learning fundamentally altered participants' engagement with learning in a post-pandemic society.

### 6.2.1 Struggle to adapt to online learning

For some participants, the speed of their institutions' response to the mandate of online learning and the guidance they offered to learners significantly influenced their personal experiences and enjoyment of education during this transition. Some participants' institutions moved to online learning in an abrupt way whereby this occurred overnight. However, by acting so quickly, it meant that they did not leave enough time to provide guidance to their students on how to adapt to online learning, how to use the online platforms such as Zoom or Teams

that teaching took place on, and the expected etiquette of online lessons. Alternatively, some institutions were slow on the transfer, leaving participants in limbo. When updates did come, it would be sudden and participants would be expected to quickly interpret and adapt to these updates while being at a distance, or 'remote' as it came to be known, making it harder to call upon people for help. This adaptation was made harder for participants who had to catch up on the work they had not been able to do while amendments were still to be put in place. This indicates that there was a clear lack of support from some institutions for helping their learners move to online learning, with responsibility shifting onto the individual learner to adapt to a completely new mode of learning and having to exercise higher amounts of agency to make this switch. Because online learning was a novel experience for the majority of participants, they did not have any previous experience to draw upon to help with it and it was only with time that this adaptation came. Consequently, adaptation took time, making the process long and challenging.

It is unsurprising that there was a clear difference in institutions' response, partly because the Government and Department for Education (DfE) provided information and guidance on closures at the last minute, and advice changed quite frequently (UCL, 2021). Education staff were expected to immediately interpret and implement guidance into their practices without any prior experience of a similar event happening, which can explain why there was a huge discrepancy in response. Bristow and Gilland (2020) expressed their concerns over the speed at which schools and universities closed when the first lockdown was announced, arguing that this was going to lead to significant impacts on young people's encounter with education. This study has expanded on this concern by highlighting some of the impacts this has had with LGBT+ young people's approach to education. For Oscar, at the time of the first lockdown he was doing his master's degree and had very clear plans to start a postgraduate research degree after finishing. Something extraordinary clearly had to happen for these plans to be derailed. Reflecting on the pandemic, he discussed how the

slow move to online learning made for an extremely stressful situation as he had to pause working on his dissertation, and it eventually led to him dropping out:

“So I dropped out of the Master’s degree because they hadn’t sorted out any reasonable way of how people would be able to transform their dissertation that they plan to be in person with basically moment’s notice. So it was getting to a point where it was really fucking everything up and they weren’t acting quickly enough, and I just thought I can’t be bothered with this. It’s not something I’m enjoying anymore, it’s giving me more stress, I’m just leaving”. (28, cisman, gay, interview 1)

Still committed to staying in higher education, he felt pressured to quickly find an alternative course feeling that he was not putting as much consideration and preparation into it than what he would have liked. As he started this new course, still in the context of online learning, his enjoyment for higher education continued to dwindle and this culminated in him dropping out from this second postgraduate course. While he initially started looking for work he had an interest in, doing this in the midst of the pandemic was a challenge. Therefore, he resorted to readjusting his work values to improve his prospects, “I applied for a good number of jobs, but then it got to the point where I thought I can’t be picky and I should just go for anything that I can get”. The impacts of the pandemic on Oscar’s education resulted in him being at a crossroad in terms of how his employment plans had changed and what the future would be (Giddens, 1991). However, with how the pandemic was affecting companies and his personal pressures for financial independence, it restricted his opportunity to research and speak with others about alternative options. For Oscar, his life prospects have become less predictable (Wyn and Dwyer, 1999), as what investments he puts into this biographical field of employment have become unclear (Thomson et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the move to online learning also affected the relational and physical resources participants could access and draw upon. Learning moved to a remote form, subsequently shifting the focus from collaborative learning to independent learning. Thus, it meant that participants were expected to develop

self-motivational skills and complete the set learning activities in their own time and understand the content on their own without having a learning community to consolidate with. A loss of being part of a learning community was something that participants felt significantly. During the lockdown(s), participants found that other students would not reach out to others for help with learning or create their own collaborative learning sessions. Some also felt uncomfortable reaching out to unfamiliar others who were in the same lesson as them, as they did not want to reach out without any prior connection being established. The process of moving from guided learning to self-directed learning was made harder by participants' learning environments changing. For all participants, as buildings had to close, they had no access to in-person learning spaces. Their new learning space was their home, and for some they would be working in unideal spaces as they did not have access to an office desk and would find themselves working on their beds. This meant that for some, they struggled associating their bedroom space as a space for learning, as they would normally keep learning and personal spaces separate.

Participants also discussed how the means by which they were expected to learn also changed. Some talked about how their workload increased as their teachers would set them a higher amount of homework than what they would normally get to substitute the decline in number of online lessons. Thus, the pressure and expectation to successfully develop time management skills increased for participants, compounded by the uncertainty of the pandemic and the likelihood of sudden policy changes. This, mixed with losing a structured daily schedule and having more free time to decide how they should spend it, meant that some participants were unprepared for this skill development which, consequently, affected their overall learning. For Josh, he talked about how the homework he would be set would have the answers on the back, and so to get around spending lots of time on the tasks he would just look at the answers. However, this impacted his learning because he was doing the homework in a passive way and not thinking about the answers he was providing. Coming back to school when

they re-opened again in September 2020, he was not at the same level of learning that he was previously at:

“This biggest example of this is Spanish. The works piling up and I was just going to look at the answers at the bottom and not do the work. If you have many, many months of not really doing Spanish you forget absolutely everything about Spanish. I got back to school and I didn’t even know basic grammar anymore”.  
(18, transman, gay, interview 1)

Principles of individualism are rife in education (Owens and de St Croix, 2020), with a focus on individuals exercising their agency to work hard and determine their own pathway. The data from this study demonstrates that these expectations of individualism were also present when participants talked about the expectation being placed solely on them to adapt to new modes of teaching and learning and develop a new skillset for this. Here, Evans’ (2002) concept of bounded agency, as outlined in Chapter 3, is useful for elucidating why participants struggled exercising their agency for developing this skillset, and how the pandemic hindered this ability. Under normal circumstances, education has a temporal dimension in which individuals develop their skills while learning new content and engaging in various learning techniques. This progression helps students pass through educational rites of passage as part of their transitions to adulthood (Aronson, 2008). With this, skill development is a gradual and guided process, helped by doing this collaboratively with others. However, the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s) and the move to online learning clearly disrupted this gradual development of skills, with participants suddenly expected to quickly develop a new skillset for a completely new way of learning, while in a remote environment and limited access to a learning community to help with this. For Josh, he was still in secondary school and had not completed any GCSEs at the time learning moved to online. Thus, he had not yet reached an educational moment where time management was required of him. Suddenly, he was expected to develop time management skills, however his agency to do so was bounded by the pandemic, affecting his learning.

The move to online learning and the consequences for their educational experiences can be understood as a critical moment for participants who struggled to adapt. This critical moment echoes that of Thomson and colleagues' (2002) theory that responses to critical moments can be out of the control of the individual because this can be influenced by how others respond to the same moment. As will be argued throughout this section, barriers to exercise agency and adapt to online learning were put in place by individual institutions' responses to the pandemic and the changes in access to physical and interpersonal resources.

School and university closures were also a significant critical moment for how participants' perspectives and approaches to education changed. This shift continued throughout the pandemic as participants' learning continued to be fractured and disrupted due to changes in education and other pandemic-related policy. Participants' narratives echo that of Coleman's (2011) argument on critical moments becoming problematic if it results in too many things for an individual to deal with, and there is a lack of fit between context and agency that allows for a straightforward response to said moment. The move to online learning was not a simple move for participants and it resulted in additional problems that they had to deal with, but with limited resources to help with this. Therefore, it resulted in their ability to adapt to online learning being incongruous with the context they suddenly found themselves in. How this affected their experience of education was that their levels of stress increased and this remained throughout the pandemic. For some participants, it resulted in a decline in enjoyment for their subjects and no longer feeling motivated to learn. This also affected how they approached assignments, as they found they would be leaving them to the last minute or asking for deadline extensions, which made them feel they were falling further behind and exacerbated their stress. The findings from this research corroborate with the findings from other studies on online learning that found young people experienced heightened anxiety and emotional strain from higher workloads (Scott et al., 2023), distractions and declining motivation resulting in longer completion times for learning activities

(MacDonald et al., 2023), and a lack of social connections making it an isolating time (The Princes Trust, 2021). While the long-term impacts of the pandemic are less researched, existing studies predict that one legacy of the pandemic will cluster around education. In particular, the exacerbation of inequalities in educational outcomes (Scott et al., 2023) and an increase in university graduates, further swelling the graduate market (MacDonald et al., 2023; The British Academy, 2021; Roberts, 2022). While testing these predictions relies on a quantitative methodology which was beyond the remit of this project, a long-term impact uncovered by this research and predicted less so in current literature is how LGBT+ young people's meaning structures about education started to change. This shift represents a turning point in their engagement with education in a post-pandemic society (Denzin, 1989). The following section focuses on a specific case history that explores the long-term implications of this change in meaning structure on their transitions to adulthood, addressing a gap in current literature regarding the profound changes in education for LGBT+ young people.

### 6.2.2 Abbie – A downward spiral towards resignation

This case history is about Abbie, whose life grid demonstrates a continued negative narrative regarding education throughout data collection. Her negative experiences with education began to affect her approach to employment as well. Refer to Appendix 14 to see Abbie's life grid in relation to the biographical field of education and employment.

Abbie is a bisexual transgender woman. When we first met (2022), she was 22 years old and in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of her integrated master's degree. Going to university was seen as an opportunity for her to continue her much enjoyed learning of STEM-based subjects, seeing university as an environment that she would fit in well with and would make good progress on. She had a smooth transition onto her course, quickly establishing strong social connections with her classmates. Interacting with them outside the learning environment became a frequent part

of her university routine. She also managed to establish a good study routine, regularly attending lectures and lab sessions, and spending most of her days on campus with her classmates. Overall, she had a successful integration into her new learning environment; she had developed a positive perspective on her degree and enjoyed the content of her new course.

The first lockdown occurred while Abbie was still in the first year of her degree. When it was announced, all her learning transitioned to an online, asynchronous format, with lectures pre-recorded and uploaded, allowing her to choose when to listen to them. Similarly, whereby her lab sessions would be in-person and tended to take the nature of group work, online this took on an individualised and self-directed format. In her account of how well the move to online learning went for her, she described how the majority of the online lectures would be of poor quality and it would be a rare occurrence that the lecturer had taken the time to edit the videos. She compared the quality and skill of the online lectures to online YouTube videos, stating “they’re worse, really, because the lecturers have recorded and edited themselves whilst YouTubers have the skills and progression of delivery and editing and pacing of the videos. Lecturers are used to [being] academics and are just not skilled in it [...] We had someone who was sat at a laptop looking down and the videos were an hour and a half because he’d left in every little tensions, left the 2 minute pauses where he collected his thoughts and looked over his notes. It was insufferable”. This subsequently affected how she approached her university work. She described that it would be hard to keep focus and it would take her longer to fully understand the content of the online lectures compared to in person, “I can’t bring myself to watch awful online lectures. It’s really hampered my ability to learn. I just struggle so much to sit down and watch someone in a monotone voice talking about something without passion or care, and just making it the most boring thing in the world”. Similarly, whereas before Abbie had integrated herself well into a learning community, with online learning she talked about how it was “isolating”, and this affected her learning because she “didn’t get the bounce from understanding the content off people”. Her course mates did not make much “effort” to dedicate time with one

another, and so connections started to become more distant. This situation ultimately affected her approach to assignments and exams, as her time management declined. She described leaving assignments to the last minute, which compromised her revision time for exams, “I’d just try and crunch revision into 2 or 2.5 hours or so, especially when I had an assessment that wasn’t an exam. So I spent the week and a half crunching the essay, and then get no revision done. I was just struggling with that”. The impact of the first lockdown can be seen in terms of how, at an institutional level, online learning was adapted to and how this affected Abbie in terms of her pace of learning and enjoyment for her course.

When I interviewed Abbie for the first time, she talked about how the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of her degree were also online. While her 2<sup>nd</sup> year coincided with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> lockdown being introduced, her 3<sup>rd</sup> year (2021/22) was when national restrictions started to be eased and most universities started bringing back in-person learning activities, albeit with ongoing restrictions on social activities. However, her department had made the decision that teaching activities would remain online for that academic year. When it came to her 4<sup>th</sup> year, the focus was predominantly on independent research, thus contact hours had been significantly reduced so that she only had a small number of modules to complete along with her individual project. By the time she started her 2<sup>nd</sup> year after a summer break, she was still struggling with online learning and keeping focused. Moving into her 2<sup>nd</sup> year term-time accommodation, her housemates made a remark on how she approached housework, asking if she had ADHD, a suspicion later confirmed by her girlfriend. This prompted her to reflect on whether she had ADHD. However, it was not until autumn 2022 that she started a time-specific course (lasting 3-4 months) to try out different medications to help manage her ADHD. This was due to her being hesitant approaching her GP seeking an ADHD diagnosis with worry that she would not be taken seriously, so instead she approached her GP for medical help with some of the other symptoms she was experiencing with her ADHD. This carried on for some time, until Abbie broached the possibility of ADHD with her doctor which resulted in her being referred to a psychiatric specialist for treatment, and being placed on

the waiting list to be seen. This hesitancy to seek an ADHD diagnosis has been confirmed by other studies, arguing that individuals with ADHD are at high risk of being stigmatised which can affect the time it takes them to make the first approach to medical professionals for help (Mueller et al., 2012).

In her account of events, Abbie's case seems to fulfil Thomson et al.'s (2002) criteria for the lockdown(s) being a 'fatalistic' moment. Here, we can see how the move to online learning and wider social and institutional factors (ibid.) hindered her agency and proactivity to be able to control the move to online learning so that it did not affect how much she enjoyed her degree and the progress she was making. Her ability to develop new skills to adapt to online learning (Giddens, 1991) was hindered by the poor quality of the online lectures, therefore she had very limited resources to base the development of her skills from. The struggle to keep focused and taking longer to understand the learning content overrode any ability to develop skills to online learning. While Giddens' (1991) talks about the ability to draw on expert systems and get advice on how to adapt to events to make them a 'fateful moment', for Abbie her expert systems would likely have been her course mates and lecturers. However, with the isolated learning and connections becoming more distant, it meant she no longer had her learning community to approach and get advice from. Similarly, with the lecturers struggling to provide good-quality online learning materials, it made them less likely to provide any substantive advice on how to adapt to online learning. The first lockdown and online learning exacerbated Abbie's underlying ADHD resulting in what was being managed well pre-pandemic, to now starting to affect her education. Thus, at the point of the first interview, the critical moment of the first lockdown had triggered a struggle to maintain a connection with her motivation for education.

By the second interview, there was a clear continuation in Abbie's narrative of how she talked about her education. Whereas at this point she had started to receive medication to help with the management of her ADHD, this was on a trial-and-error basis whereby she would take a different course of medication to find one that is most effective for her. By the second interview, the medication she

had taken so far had not been effective and so her struggles with staying focused and managing time had continued. With her ADHD, one of the symptoms she suffered from was with her sleep routine, often sleeping during the day. While at this point most of the course mates she made connections with in her first year were back on campus, her irregular sleeping patterns hampered her ability to re-engage with those communities. Thus, her struggles with ADHD were keeping her from breaking away from this isolated learning. While the struggle with time management had continued, how this was affecting her education had started to change. Whereas before she would often leave preparation for assignments and exams to the last minute, now she was starting to extend her deadlines to the summer as she was now struggling with the initial stage of preparation:

“I delayed an assessment to sit as the first time in the summer because I know if I didn’t, I’d fail. I did that last week with another assessment, I couldn’t concentrate and I couldn’t get enough of it done in the time I had left”.

When we had met for the third and final time (summer, 2023), she had finished her education. However, reaching this point was not a smooth process. Her referral to the psychiatric specialist had come to an end, but they were unable to find a suitable course of medication to help manage her ADHD. Consequently, she was approaching the summer months with no medication, struggling with her ADHD, and having a cluster of extended assignments and exams to complete. All of this culminated in significant struggles to complete her assignments, leading to a decision between her and the department that she would complete these assignment in absentia so that she can get her master’s degree. However, there was a clear shift in her narration of education. At the time of the first and second interview, while Abbie struggled with education there was an underlying motivation to complete her degree. This can be seen with her making the decision to move deadlines so that it worked better for her. At this point of the final interview, all that motivation seemed to have gone, replaced with a resigned narrative:

“I actually haven’t finished that masters. I have 3 of the modules to sit this year whilst doing a leave of absence [...] I went to pieces a bit in the summer and just

sort of gave up [...] I've got to do it now. I'm not sure if I will be bothered to. I really didn't enjoy my degree and I don't care if I get the master's as much it would be nice to have. I'm sort of at the point where I will either do it and it'll be fine, or I won't and it's okay because I've got a degree at the end of the day. I don't need the masters".

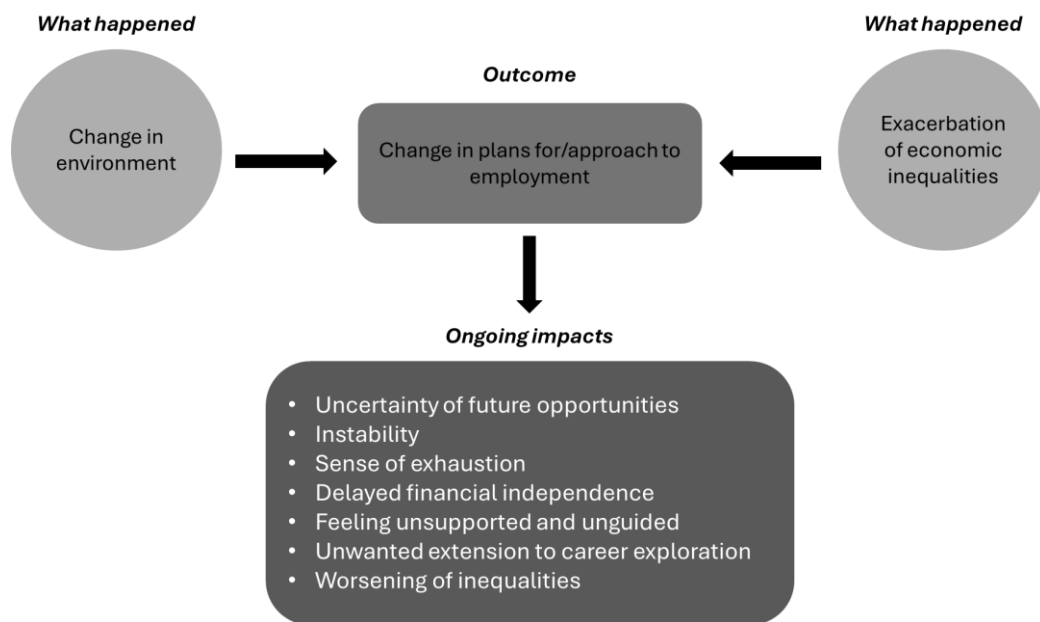
My interpretation of the lockdown(s) and online learning being a fatalistic moment seems to have been a 'turning point' for how it turned the course of Abbie's education. Before the pandemic, Abbie saw education as a field where she would thrive, and these expectations were initially met when she started university. However, the first lockdown and the sustained reliance on online learning resulted in a decline in her enjoyment of learning, resulting in an enduring narrative of disengagement and struggle. This struggle peaked around assignments and exams, where the consequences of online learning were revisited in the ongoing biographical narrative (McLeod and Thomson, 2009). Overall, the critical moment of lockdown affected Abbie's sense of competence and belonging within education, leading her to reassess how well she truly fits within the academic environment.

Thomson and colleagues (2004) argue that individuals invest in biographical fields where they feel competent during their transition to adulthood. However, critical moments can alter this sense of competence, impacting investments in other fields (Lanctot and Poulin, 2024). This was the case for Abbie, as her disconnection from education started to affect her approach to employment. When I asked Abbie in the first interview what she wanted the next 12 months to be like for her transitions to adulthood, she stressed the importance of gaining financial independence soon after graduating to support a mobile lifestyle and continue funding her hormone replacement therapy (HRT). To do this, she wanted to get her master's degree and have a graduate scheme secured by the time she finished her education. However, by the final interview, she had not secured a graduate job, citing the stress of education as a factor affecting her mindset and readiness to apply. This idea of mindset can be understood as a way in which investments in biographical fields are made. Having a strong mindset is

especially important for navigating the demanding graduate job application process (Ingram and Allen, 2018) and to continuously search for jobs, write CVs, and complete applications (Szapowicz, 2023). The loss of motivation to invest in employment has delayed her financial independence, placing her in a precarious position for her gender identity investment and mobility.

### 6.3 Employment

Figure 3 below visually displays the pandemic's impact on participants' employment, demonstrating what *happened*, the *outcome*, and the *ongoing* impacts in a post-pandemic society. This image is based on the cross-sectional, thematic comparison of experiences of employment during and in a post-pandemic society across participants. Therefore, this figure incorporates the similarities and differences in experiences. Interestingly, where the differences emerged was in relation to participants' educational background. For the participants on the left where they encountered a *change in environment*, they had already attended university or were still in HE during the pandemic. Participants on the right, who experienced an *exacerbation of economic inequalities*, are those who left education at the compulsory leaving age. Despite the differing impacts of the pandemic, participants narrated navigating these effects in similar ways in a post-pandemic society, particularly regarding their approach to employment, sense of progression and developing financial independence. As such, two case histories will be focused on in this section, Fi and Aspen, as their stories reflect this broader pattern from the data.



**Figure 8: Impacts of the pandemic on employment**

### 6.3.1 Fi – Swimming in a sea of uncertainty

Fi's case is about how the lockdown(s) resulted in a *change in environment* and how this affected her employment.

Fi is a transgender woman and lesbian. I first met her when she was 22 years old and had just started the final year of her integrated master's degree at university. Before starting university, she had no concrete idea/plan about what she wanted to do for employment, however she knew this would be STEM-related as this was an area she felt most competent at. Starting university in 2018, her career focus became more defined, largely influenced by her department's career outcome expectations for their students, which were deeply embedded into the course design and structure. The academic year 2020/21 was when she started her industrial placement for the year, organised by her department and in line with the career expectations they have for their students. The company that she worked for had made the decision to implement remote working when the first lockdown was announced, and this working arrangement continued while Fi

completed her placement. This severely affected Fi's experience. She was working under isolating working conditions: working remotely, unable to interact on a casual sense with colleagues, and unable to form any substantial connections with colleagues. Her outlook on the industry she was working in was starting to change because of working remotely throughout the placement, feeling that the industry was exploiting the lockdown(s) and remote working to increase their profits at the expense of the employee's struggle working in isolation. Thus, an antipathetic perspective on the industry started to develop, with a growing belief that other industries would be as equally exploitative and disregarding of employee's needs:

“It accelerated my complete lack of respect, and this belief in any integrity from corporations while working [...] it was a big underlying factor in why I stopped wanting that for the future”.

This has left her with a sense of uncertainty over alternative careers that she could pursue, including whether the skillset she has been developing from her course could be transferable to another industry. At her second interview, she started to feel this division between her course's career expectations and her own personal work values, with this increased sense of feeling hindered by her degree and being occupied with uncertainty over her future and what alternative careers she could pursue:

“All the time spent preparing me for path number one, it feels squandered now that I know I don't want to do it. I haven't spent any of that time preparing for anything else”.

By her third interview, it was coming to the time when she needed to start applying for graduate jobs. This feeling of uncertainty was starting to affect how she approached looking, feeling that she was not being as proactive because she was not sure of alternatives, and she could not approach her department as they had prepared her for a specific trajectory. She was having to spend more of her free time on extra-curricular activities, alongside completing her degree, to develop a more balanced skill set. Moreover, she was having to expend more of

her agency to identify and seek out potential networks that could help guide her next steps in employment.

Fi's story demonstrates that a critical moment does not have to impact the individual in the moment but might later in retrospect turn into a 'fateful' moment. While the critical moment of Fi starting her industrial placement changed the environment she was in, it was the critical moment of the first lockdown and the company's response that ultimately shaped the working conditions that Fi faced during her placement. It can be argued that the critical moment of the first lockdown was in-between it being a 'fateful'/'fatalistic' moment in terms of how it shaped Fi's work values. By working through those isolating working conditions and the disparity between what her and her colleagues wanted and the lack of response by the company, Fi was able to undertake identity work and personal research to explore her own work values and what this means for working at similar companies:

"I became more and more disillusioned with the entire industry. I became increasingly convinced that I wouldn't be happy in such a job again [...] I bought a few books and I read and compared it to my own experiences [...] I've decided I don't want to work in the kind of cushy tech world because I don't think it helps anyone".

However, she was unable to draw on what Giddens' (1991) calls 'expert systems' to seek advice from others for understanding how her newly uncovered work values would align with other tech-related industries where her skillset would be transferable. As discussed above, she was hindered by both her department and the company she was working for, which were two key institutions shaping her career trajectory. Consequently, the social network she found herself to be surrounded by were limited and restrictive for what help and guidance they could provide. In agreement with Settersten (2015), the institutions that Fi found herself in shaped the kind of people she came into contact and formed relationships with. Thompson et al.'s (2002) argument that some critical moments cannot be neatly categorised as either 'fateful' or 'fatalistic' is clearly applicable here, as

individuals can possess a mixed set of resources that shape their responses to such moments.

Re-visiting Fi for the second and third interview, the critical moment of lockdown evolved to be a turning point, as the discovery of new information about herself placed her in a different world with different expectations regarding her career aspirations. Fu (2023) applies the concept 'double helix' to argue how education and work are two interconnected institutions where recognition and meaning are achieved. Education is an institution where self-development occurs, and students can develop ideas of what it means to work and what their work values are as they learn more subject-specific information and develop skillsets. Work can also encompass a valuable learning experience where meanings of work start to develop. This concept is applicable to Fi's case in terms of how her department had already started to shape her career trajectory. However, her placement allowed her to learn more about herself, creating a divide between her and the department and leading to a decline in her emotional investment in her degree. Consequently, the bond of the 'double helix' between education and employment had broken down. Bourdieu's (1990) theory on capital and Thomson's (2011) notion of the biographical method further expand on how these dynamics affected Fi's sense of competency and investment in employment. The social, cultural, and material benefits of her degree was no longer seen to be useful in helping her invest in her economic adult identity, resulting in growing uncertainty about her future employment and feeling unsupported and unguided from the educational system. As King (2015) argues, underemployment has become the norm for young people in the UK, and is a particular concern for graduates navigating a competitive graduate market. For Fi, she is now approaching this economic precarity with a heightened sense of uncertainty, limited resources to help with this process, and increased pressure to exercise her individual agency to self-develop across different sectors to avoid negative outcomes.

### 6.3.2 Aspen – A relentless journey

Aspen's case is one of where *economic inequalities were exacerbated* by the pandemic.

Aspen is a non-binary bisexual individual who was 20 years old and unemployed when I first met them. Before the pandemic, they had a turbulent experience with education and employment. During high school their education was relatively stable and they managed to pass their GCSE's, albeit scoring low grades across the board. Since going to college, their education became unstable as they switched to different courses three times. With the first two courses, their interest dwindled resulting in them dropping out and moving to a completely different course. While they eventually joined a course they were really enjoying and planned to pursue it at a higher level of learning, it was in a location too far away from where they live, and eventually they lost the motivation to carry on with the long journey. Consequently, Aspen finished their education at the compulsory leaving age and with the lowest tier of educational qualifications. Although Aspen secured a job that they really enjoyed at the local leisure centre after finishing their education, they were made redundant months before the pandemic due to the centre's closure. Since then, they have been unable to find similar work unless they are willing to travel long distances. Therefore, they were coming into the pandemic unemployed, with few qualifications, and finding work became a lot harder as vacancies diminished and competition increased. As a result, Aspen faced constant rejections from job applications and received no feedback to help them increase their chance of success with future applications. They described this as a relentless journey, and their perspective on finding a job began to shift negatively. They grew increasingly concerned that a prolonged period of unemployment would hinder their future opportunities, fearing it would take longer than they desired to secure a position:

“The pandemic made placing [sic] a job even harder. I've now got a big old black mark on my CV, so I've been finding that really difficult”.

At the first interview they were still unemployed, still applying for work, but their approach and perspective about finding work was starting to change. With this fear over their job prospects, they discussed that they were now applying for more precarious forms of employment, such as part-time and temporary work, just to get a sense of progression and more work experience under their belt. Thus, at the time of the first interview, they were already starting to make compromises over finding a stable form of employment, and this was starting to negatively affect their mental health:

“I feel completely stuck. I’m kind of already settling for a situation that I don’t want”.

By the time I interviewed Aspen for the second time they had managed to secure temporary, part-time work at a retail store however resigned soon after when realising how exploitative the work was. They discussed how the job had initially been mis-advertised and once they started, they discovered they would be underpaid, treated unfairly by colleagues, and found the work to be demeaning and unenjoyable. With this experience, they realised that they would not enjoy another similar temporary, exploitative form of work:

“I valiantly lasted three shifts, including the induction, before I realised holy fucking crap I just cannot cope with this, it’s soul crushing”.

While they initially re-started applying for work, it was a similar cycle of constant rejections and no feedback. That severely affected their mental health, knowing that they would not enjoy another similar exploitative job, but not getting anywhere else with other forms of employment. It culminated in them taking a break from applying for work so that they could work on getting their mental health to a better place. When I met them for the third interview, their mental health had worsened to the point where they were now struggling with sleeping at irregular times. Consequently, they had made the decision to continue taking a pause from applying for work. This was with knowing from previous experience that getting constantly rejected would be detrimental to their mental health. Moreover, they also discussed that their ongoing struggles with mental health would hinder their ability to sustain a job in the long term:

“I realised it would be such a precarious situation for me to try and maintain a job right now with how my head and sleeping are pipelined into each other. I’ve decided it’s just unfeasible right now, which was a very disappointing and sad conclusion for me to come to, to be honest”.

The critical moment of the first lockdown, and how that coincided with previous critical moments that occurred in Aspen’s life, fulfils Thomson et al.’s (2002) criteria of the lockdown being a ‘fatalistic’ moment in terms of its impacts on Aspen. The financial strain experienced by companies and its impact on the job market was an out-of-control critical moment for Aspen. However, the structure that Aspen found themselves in before the pandemic, being a missing middle young person, made it a lot harder to find work (Brozsely and Nixon, 2022). As established in youth studies, being a ‘missing middle’ youth can result in finding work taking much longer compared to young people with higher qualifications, making them more likely to end up in undesirable positions (Brozsely and Nixon, 2022; Morris, 2023). In response to the exacerbation of economic inequalities, Aspen sought precarious forms of employment to foster a sense of progress toward financial independence. Consequently, Aspen was starting to develop a mindset of simply being grateful for any form of employment, similar to what Brozsley and Nixon (2022) found in their study on ‘missing middle’ youth. However, this can be theoretically understood as an out-of-control response (Thomson et al., 2002). As discussed in Chapter 5, the majority of participants, including Aspen, discussed that they want to have a stable form of employment to develop financial independence and to work on other developmental processes. Therefore, to resort to finding precarious work was clearly not an agentic choice that Aspen made, rather it was shaped by the first lockdown.

This critical moment, which resulted in a shift in Aspen’s approach to work and a short stint in a precarious job, can be seen as a turning point that further shaped their perspective on employment. Echoing MacDonald and colleagues (2023), Aspen’s experience of working in a precarious job struck a fear in them that working in a less than desirable job would be their long-term employment. This study expands on MacDonald et al.’s (2023) findings by illustrating how this fear

has had long-term implications for Aspen. This fear significantly impacted their mental health, resulting in an emotional coping mechanism characterised by avoiding job applications and distancing themselves from the risk of working in another precarious job. This behaviour can be understood as a means of resisting going into 'nowhere jobs' (Cuzzocrea, 2022). However, this avoidance has meant that Aspen is not in education, employment, or a form of training, resulting in a long-term NEET status throughout the data collection period. As such, the pandemic has exacerbated Aspen's challenges in achieving financial independence, leading to long-term economic instability, significant delays in developing financial independence, and a sense of exhaustion in the job search. Their mental health has deteriorated, and inequalities have worsened. The long-term NEET status is particularly concerning as Hutchinson and colleagues (2016) argue being a NEET can lead to continuous cycles of engagement and disengagement with employment, significantly impacting personal wellbeing (Lorinc et al., 2020). Worryingly for Aspen, it raises significant questions about what their youth transitions will continue to look like beyond what is already known.

### 6.3.3 Economic uncertainty

Both Fi and Aspen have experienced similar outcomes of uncertainty, instability, a sense of exhaustion, stalled progress, feeling unguided, and a worsening of inequalities, despite these challenges stemming from different responses to the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s). These outcomes reflect a broader pattern across the whole dataset in terms of long-term economic impacts. Therefore, this finding adds complexity to Cook et al.'s (2024) prediction that there is likely to be a structural difference in terms of how young people have been economically impacted by the pandemic. This research has shown that there is more nuance to this that needs to be accounted for, certainly in relation to what social, cultural, and material resources young people have access to. For

instance, while on the surface it could have been predicted that Fi was able to take strategic time out to engage in planning an alternative economic future and potentially achieve a different outcome, the resources available to her and their structural limitations ultimately acted as hindrances. This research highlights the need to account for and understand the long-term impacts of the pandemic on young people who are considered ‘advantaged’.

One of the drawbacks of this research was that when data collection concluded, Fi was approaching the crossroad of finishing education and transitioning into employment. Meanwhile, Aspen had decided to take a break from finding work so they could focus on their mental health. Thus, I encountered a typical problem with longitudinal research whereby data analysis never finishes, so these conclusions are based on the data collected. By engaging with youth transitions theory and literature, it is possible to predict how Fi and Aspen’s transitions to financial independence might unfold. However, their transitions are likely to involve more complexity than anticipated. Therefore, further research is necessary to understand the ongoing factors that influence transitions to financial independence.

## 6.4 Living situation

In terms of how young LGBT+ people’s living situation was impacted by the pandemic, participants had a mixture of experiences that were largely influenced by restrictions on social and economic opportunities, as well as changes in their interpersonal environments.

### 6.4.1 Change in living environment

The pandemic impacted some participants' living situation in terms of how they became stuck living with unsupportive family members. Before the pandemic, some participants had already been living with parents who were not accepting of their identity/s, often spending most of their time at school, with friends, or engaging in leisure activities to minimise interactions at home. However, the three lockdowns curtailed social opportunities, leaving participants feeling 'stuck' with their unsupportive families and without a means to escape. For example, Josh described how his dad consistently invalidated his transgender identity, perceiving his identity as a phase and blocking him from starting hormone replacement therapy until he turned 18. However, as Josh was still in school throughout the three lockdowns, he had no opportunity to move out. He shared:

"I don't really talk to my dad. I live with him but if he's in a room then I'm not in that room. It was quite weird during the lockdowns. I was mostly in my room if I'm honest. Being around my dad probably wasn't the best, I probably needed a bit more space than that, a lot more space than that". (18, transman, gay, interview 1).

Thus, for Josh, all opportunities to continue maintaining separation from his family were hampered by the pandemic, resorting in him staying isolated in his own bedroom. Alternatively, some participants who had already moved out to attend university chose to return to their family homes to avoid feeling isolated while living alone. However, by making this decision, participants discussed that they were coming back into a starkly contrasting unsupportive environment than the one they were previously in. They faced challenges such as having their identities questioned by their parents, being deadnamed and misgendered. This was the case for Abbie:

"What happened was I moved back home with my mum and dad who are not quite as understanding. They are of the opinion my identity is just a phase, you know? Just a young person in an uncertain position has just decided they're

trans. They're open about saying that. They kept messing up with names and stuff, deadnaming and misgendering. I know that they don't do it on purpose, but it still got to me, especially when in Uni everyone gets it right and its fine. It's a bit emotionally exhausting to get back to being misgendered and deadnamed, that makes it harder". (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1)

For Abbie, the risk of isolation was seen as a worse alternative than living with unsupportive parents. However, this choice came at the expense of her personal sense of self and comfort. Furthermore, for some participants, the initial experience of living independently prior to the pandemic provided a critical opportunity to consider and explore their sexual and/or gender identity for the first time without parental gaze. Fi, for instance, talked about how moving to university allowed her to think about her gender identity and experiment with her gender expression. However, she had not come out as transgender to her mum by the time she moved back home during the first lockdown. Consequently, she had to alter her how she presented herself which was significantly harmful to her sense of self:

"I was required to present in a way that didn't arouse suspicion [...] I was forced to continue to go with the flow, accept use of my old name and being referred to as a boy. It was a sharp shift from being out to people at uni. That deeply impacted me, I was entirely closed up for that entire period". (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

These findings are similar to other studies indicating that some LGBT+ young people faced additional stressors while isolating in unsupportive and unwelcoming environments (Clarke and Carter, 2023; Grant et al., 2021). However, this research introduces a youth transitions perspective, shedding light on the implications of these experiences for participants' journeys toward independent living. Overtime, the sustained pressure of living in an unsupportive environment led to increasingly fractious relationships with participants' families, resulting in frequent arguments over minor issues. Consequently, achieving independent living became increasingly essential for escaping these tensions. As discussed in Chapter 5, participants discussed that they would

consider temporarily moving back to the family home for material and financial support, viewing it as a necessary step toward achieving permanent independent living. Participants whose environments starkly changed conveyed a strong intention to take advantage of the first opportunity they get to leave their family homes. They emphasised the critical importance of sustaining this independence to prevent the need to move back in with their families. Thus, moving back home to get financially ahead has become a limited option that can only be tolerated for so long, adding further stress to maintain financial independence. This is particularly concerning given that (LGBT+) young people often experience long-term instability in low-paying and precarious work (MacDonald, 2017; King, 2015), a situation exacerbated by the pandemic (Cohen, 2020). The following section provides a case history of Ollie to illustrate how these dynamics have played out in a post-pandemic society.

Studies have largely explored how the pandemic resulted in LGBT+ young people having to move back to the family home, with very little being focused on experiences in alternative living situations. Houghton and Tasker (2020) found in their quantitative study that for LGBT+ young people living with their friends, the majority reported that they felt comfortable and safe in that environment during the lockdown. However, this research provides an alternative, qualitative perspective on how living with friends also became a stressful, isolating environment. Some discussed that when the first lockdown occurred and university campuses closed, they chose to continue living in their student accommodation to get the most out of it financially, even though all their friends had moved out. Thus, while they were still safe in that environment, what was once a sociable environment suddenly became isolating. Others discussed how the mental health of their housemates declined so significantly that it negatively impacted the overall comfort of their living environment. This was the case for Fi, whose situation was a significant factor in her decision to move back in with her unsupportive mother. She explained how what had previously been a relatively comfortable environment suddenly became fragile, as one of her housemates grew increasingly anxious about contracting the virus and becoming seriously ill.

Fi found herself having to take on the responsibility of looking out for her housemate's wellbeing, at the expense of her own mental health. Combined with the pervasive isolation of the lockdown and her inability to seek help for her own mental health, this led her to decide to remove herself from that environment and move in with her mum. This finding relates to the argument made by Thomson et al. (2002) that young people can have little control over the decisions and actions of others' responses to a critical moment, yet must deal with the consequences. For Fi, having to deal with the decline in her housemate's mental health negatively impacted her own youth transitions. She expressed that, for her adulthood, she wants to live with a stable group of friends and viewed university as an opportunity to explore living with various people and in different situations. However, the pandemic abruptly curtailed that exploration and had significant implications for her relationships with those friends:

“The first lockdown was a very, very low period in my life. I stopped being able to help my two friends who I lived with, and I ended up never speaking to them again, the relationships just broke down”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

Other participants also talked about how the critical moment(s) of the lockdown(s) resulted in them becoming financially stuck in their current living situation due to how economic opportunities were hampered. As Henderson et al. (2007) argue, youth transition studies need to consider young people's social location and the biographical fields that are in play to understand why some adult identities are (or are not) invested in. In connection with the above section on employment, some participants talked about how unemployment became extended due to wider economic factors, or they had to sacrifice career development based on their work organisation's response to the pandemic. These have been major, undesirable critical moments (Levy and Buhlmann, 2016) that have impacted their ability to invest in independent living as part of their adult identities. Returning to Oscar's case outlined in education, his career restart, brought on by the disruption to his education during the lockdown, has come at the expense of his living situation. Talking about his adulthood, Oscar discussed that his ideal living situation is to purchase his own home with his

husband by his late 20's, assuming he followed his initial plan of working in academia. However, by having to adapt those plans and the subsequent financial setbacks, he is now financially stuck having to rent privately until he can develop more of an income to get an affordable mortgage. Consequently, Oscar's investment into home ownership and stability has been further delayed:

“I think about where I thought I would be in life. I'm not far off 30, by this time I thought I would have my own house and I mean I feel like that's not gonna happen for years to come. Life is inherently different in so many ways, we don't own a house, we probably won't for a very long time, and we don't make as much money as I would like to”. (28, cisman, gay, interview 1)

#### 6.4.2 Ollie – Accelerated independence

Ollie is a gay cisgender man. When I first met Ollie, he was 20 years old and living in private student accommodation on the south coast of England. He was in the final year of his performing arts course and articulated a strong desire to continue working in performing, music, and art. Working in this sector is particularly important to his adult and sexual identity as he feels with theatre, he can be himself and express himself in a way that would not be negatively perceived. At this point, he expressed the hope that after he graduates, he will be able to continue living independently and secure an acting-related job in the same area he currently resides, which will provide him with enough of an income to maintain his current living situation.

During the first interview, while I was developing a biographical understanding of his life, he recounted an experience before the pandemic when he was sexually assaulted by someone from his college during a day out with friends. This event had a lasting impact on his relationship with his mum. He explained that his friends were unsupportive and did not respond with the understanding he had hoped for. Moreover, his mum showed a lack of concern and infantilised him, failing to grasp the significant impact the experience had on Ollie's sense of self

and confidence. He recalled a comment his mum said to him after he discussed the situation with her, “you have to understand they’re all kids, they don’t know how to deal with this”. Thus, he described how at that time he tried to keep some separation from his mum, spending most of his spare time working at the local leisure centre or on after-college leisure activities, “I put a lot of focus on independency and trying to take responsibility to maintain some separation from her”. However, when the first lockdown happened all opportunities to keep separated from his mum had disappeared. He explained that both his mother and sibling were vulnerable to the virus, which meant he had to be cautious about how often he went out and who he met with, ensuring he did not put his family’s health at risk. He also talked about how the family environment became “very manic”, with “repetitive arguments” occurring between him and his mother, ultimately leading him to respond by avoiding confrontation. Thus, he described how he would “spend most of my time in my room for the same reasons of if I was downstairs we would have an argument”.

In his account of events, the critical moment of the first lockdown seemed to fulfil Giddens’ (1991) criteria of it being a ‘fateful’ moment. He discussed how the change in his living environment intensified the pressure on his already strained relationship with his mum following the critical moment of his sexual assault. As his living environment became increasingly fragile, he reflected on how it “resolved a bit more of my perspectives on where I was with my family. Maybe my idea of being an adult is connected to how I am in contact with my family and stuff”. The first lockdown underscored the importance of gaining independence from his mum and moving out of the family home, stating, “moving away from home was something I was very much looking forward to”. The lockdown prompted him to revisit the critical moment of his sexual assault and his mum’s response, leading him to reconsider the importance of accelerating his path to independent living and assess when he could realistically achieve that goal. Thus, Ollie was engaged in risk assessments and identity work, prioritising independent living for his adulthood, as well as his mental health. With the structure of his performing arts course, his student loan increased in his final

year. He immediately took that as an opportunity to move out and re-establish independence from his mum, “I had a moment of glee and that I can do this on my own”. Crucial in this instance was Ollie’s access to the material capital of student financing that came with progressing on his course.

For Ollie, the critical moment of the first lockdown and the subsequent need for accelerated independence became a turning point, significantly shaping his approach to independent living. When I met him for the final interview, he reflected on his course finishing and the necessity of considering both employment and sufficient income to maintain independent living. As he approached this crossroad, the need for independent living and separation from his mum was the enduring identity, however it came at the expense of his career aspirations. He discussed how he had to compromise pursuing an acting career, acknowledging that securing an acting job would take a long time, “the trickiest part to start doing acting professionally is getting the job in the first place. It’s tricky to say the least”. Ollie’s perspective on breaking into the acting sector aligns with Allen and Hollingworth’s (2013) finding that creative industries are hard to enter, remain in and progress with as opportunities are insecure and fragmented. Thus, encountering this structure of opportunity placed limitations on his options and choices with regards to his living situation (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Thomson et al., 2004). Consequently, he emphasised the need to prioritise stable employment, stating, “my priority was having stability with work”. This turning point of accelerating his independent living has placed him in a different world, with a discontinuity on pursuing acting as his adult identity:

“The issue with working full time was freedom, I didn’t have the time to do acting. The idea that I wasn’t doing anything has been troubling me the most. I feel I’m shutting the door on it and I really don’t like that. [...] The days I had off work I don’t want to be doing more work, I want to be resting, I want to be relaxing, I wanna be taking time for myself. Realistically and objectively I am not in the exact place I would have wanted to have been 12 months ago”.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s) have been significant within the three major biographical fields involved in developing independence, (education, employment, and living situation). These moments have served as ‘fateful’ or ‘fatalistic’ moments in participants’ youth transitions, resulting in them becoming turning points. While the chapter has focused on these fields individually, it has also highlighted their interconnection, demonstrating how impacts in one field have overspilled into another. Consequently, I propose the concept of an ‘ongoing domino effect of becoming independent’, wherein the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s) continue to be revisited in a post-pandemic society as other youth transitions are being approach and navigated.

Fisher’s (2012 in McPherson, 2024) concept ‘hauntology’ is particularly useful for understanding how the past experiences of the pandemic remain linked to the present and shape perspectives on the future. This has been explored through Abbie’s experiences, where past experiences of online learning and the subsequent exacerbation of her ADHD have left her currently feeling unmotivated to apply for work, placing her in a precarious position regarding her financial independence. Similarly, Fi’s past experiences of working remotely have prompted her to reassess her work values and future career aspirations. The pandemic’s legacy continues to affect her present situation and outlook on the future, leaving her uncertain about her career choices and lacking the clarity and motivation she initially had before the pandemic. For Ollie, the first lockdown intensified the existing pressures on his relationship with his mum, which had already been strained due to a prior critical moment. As Ollie neared the end of his performing arts course, he found himself revisiting the pandemic’s impact on his relationship with his mum, ultimately prioritising independence over pursuing his ideal career. This shift has resulted in a sense of loss for Ollie, who has had to make significant compromises regarding his career aspirations.

In summary, the critical moment(s) of lockdown(s) continue to be revisited in a post-pandemic society, affecting how participants approach new biographical fields as part of their youth transitions to independence.

# **Chapter 7 – (Re) Appreciation for friendship and community**

## **7.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 5, I discuss how ‘Close and supportive networks’ and ‘Engagement with inclusive communities’ are two important adulthood markers for participants, providing essential social and cultural resources for developing adult identities. While these are both separate adulthood markers, they are both being covered in this chapter. This is because the cross-sectional, thematic comparison of experiences of the biographical fields ‘friendship’ and ‘lifestyle’ highlighted a similarity in how the pandemic re-emphasised the importance of these fields for participants. However, participants have had mixed experiences in re-engaging with them in a post-pandemic society, which will be further explored in this chapter.

To understand the significance of the pandemic’s impact on friendships and community, and its implications for LGBT+ young people’s youth transitions, it is important to briefly re-visit the arguments made in Chapter’s 2 and 3 and the findings from Chapter 5. LGBT+ young people are becoming adults in a society that imposes expectations about the adulthood markers they should achieve. These expectations are set by the state through the framework of citizenship, with the assumption that LGBT+ individuals will assimilate themselves into cis-heteronormative structures to receive state-based rights. Participants reflected on these expectations to discuss where they place themselves in relation to these norms, with their narrative being centred around ‘difference’, affecting the extent to which they perceive the ability to obtain adulthood. However, they also discussed the importance of reclaiming their subjectivities and pursuing their self-defined adult identities. Close friendships and inclusive communities were highlighted as two significant biographical fields, providing important social and

cultural resources that allow adult identities to be accessed, affirmed, and constructed (Henderson et al., 2007).

While participants selected what biographical fields and relationships match their goals and values, Bynner (2005) argues that access to these can be constrained by the wider social structure. This argument will be explored throughout this chapter to understand how the pandemic continues to restrict access to friendships and inclusive communities for some participants. This chapter has been split into two sections and focuses respectively on the biographical fields of friendship and community. Each section will focus initially on why the pandemic resulted in a (re)appreciation, what this (re)appreciation looks like, and how it has been approached in a post-pandemic society. In the friendship section, smaller longitudinal cases will be woven throughout, as the analysis revealed a diverse range of experiences regarding the (re)appreciation of friendships and the approaches taken. Therefore, including one case history would not adequately reflect this mix in experience. However, the communities section will revisit Aspen's case from Chapter 6 to explore how the impacts on employment have subsequently affected their engagement with communities, hindering the development of an adult identity.

## 7.2 New priorities for friendships

The pandemic resulted in mixed experiences regarding the impact on friendships. Some participants developed new connections, while others experienced a distancing or breakdown of existing connections; connections became significantly more difficult to develop; or emotional dependency on friends increased. Despite these changes, the significance of friendships remained a consistent theme in participants' narratives throughout the data collection process. The pandemic served as a moment where the importance of friendships was re-realised. These impacts centre around the 'friendship ethic' (Weeks et al., 2001), which was argued as relevant to participants' adult identities in Chapter 5.

### 7.2.1 New connections

For some participants, the lockdowns and the increased free time allowed them to focus on developing friendships. Some were able to reach out to people online that they had unintentionally become distant with before the pandemic, finding it easier to dedicate time to reconnect and catch up on each other's lives. Throughout the pandemic, they were able to continue working on these networks, re-establishing connections to the best quality that they could be online. Similarly, as will be explored later in this chapter in relation to communities, some participants were able to start developing new connections with one or two individuals from the online communities they engaged with. While experiences with online communities and online interactions varied and affected participants' sense of self differently, some positive outcomes emerged in terms of friendships. When social distancing restrictions were fully lifted in February 2022, those participants who felt comfortable returning to public spaces were able to meet their (new) friends in person. However, these meet-ups did not happen immediately; participants talked about how they took their time, still wary of the risk of COVID in public settings. Once they overcame their anxieties about COVID and began meeting in person, participants realised that in-person interactions were of higher quality. Consequently, participants have dedicated more time to spending with friends in person rather than relying solely on online means. This shift was clearly reflected in Jesse's account:

"I've been able to meet up with friends properly. We have a group chat that is arranged specifically for meeting up. [...] So with these friends I'd met during the lockdown online, We've just finally managed to meet each other. Some of the people I knew from high school, we'd lost touch and then got back in touch during the pandemic. A couple of them I've met specifically online through support groups and stuff. So we're now meeting up occasionally". (23, nonbinary, bisexual, interview 1)

Similarly, for Chloe, the lockdowns provided an opportunity to engage with LGBT+ online communities as an alternative to the physical communities she was part of before the pandemic, allowing her to learn more about her gender identity. She talked about how she managed to make a close friend from one of these online communities, and during data collection she met her in person for the first time. Chloe expressed:

“It was such a joy and blessing to meet her in person and [we] certainly couldn’t have done this during COVID restrictions. But also because of COVID I was able to find the discord server which was an important source for creating that friendship”. (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 2)

Overtime, this friendship has developed to the extent that Chloe now considers her as her “new best friend”. Chloe included reflective entries in her scrapbook on moments where they attended cultural events together and supported one another in the process (see below). She explained, “I’ve been going to watch rugby matches with her, and it has been so wonderful going out to enjoy a typically male dominated environment as women”.

when I said March and April had been busy I wasn't kidding.  
[redacted] my new best friend and I went to see the Women's Six Nations rugby [redacted]  
[redacted]



**Figure 9: Chloe's Instagram scrapbook entry including a picture of the rugby match and who she went with.**

Chloe’s emphasis on the significance of this new friendship closely resonates with Weeks et al.’s (2001) concept of the ‘friendship ethic’. There has been an ongoing commitment to developing this friendship to the point where they are now providing mutual support and comfort while going through new experiences.

Therefore, it can be argued that the pandemic was a 'fateful' critical moment (Giddens, 1991) for Chloe, as she exercised her agency and was in control over how she used online communities to develop connections with others. This experience has resulted in a meaningful relationship that she highly values and is committed to working on in person. These findings also present an alternative perspective to Woodman's (2012) argument that young people can find it challenging to maintain close friendships and developing new acquaintances into deeper connections during youth transitions. The pandemic served as a pivotal moment for both Jesse and Chloe, offering them the opportunity to dedicate more time to working on their friendships. Even after the lifting of social distancing restrictions, as their lives have become busier again, both have continued to prioritise spending in-person time with their friends.

### 7.2.2 Lost connections

However, not all participants experienced positive outcomes regarding friendships during the pandemic. For some, the lockdown prompted a period of reflection on their social interactions, leading them to consider why they prioritised interacting with certain friends over others. Consequently, they were reflecting on the 'friendship ethic' (Weeks et al., 2001) in relation to their circle of friends at that time. This finding is similar to that from Craciun's (2024) study, which found that the pandemic resulted in some young people developing a better judgement on who to have as friends. Through adopting a qualitative longitudinal methodology, this research expands on Craciun's (2024) findings by exploring how participants have navigated their newfound self-awareness. Coming into a post-pandemic society, some participants have cut connections from friends who they realised were not providing the support or care they needed. While participants remain committed to having a close-knit friendship network, there has been an increase in selectivity over how they approach new people, and more caution is being expressed deciding whether potential friends

will be supportive and significant. This selectivity has shifted participants' priorities toward inclusive communities as important sources for developing new friendships. This was illustrated by James, who discussed the varying interactions he had with different friendship groups, noting that these experiences prompted him to reflect on his social networks:

“I realised I was leaving interactions with my pre-university hometown friends feeling rubbish and not feeling good about myself. It quickly dawned on me that I didn't want to be friends with these people anymore, so I cut one person specifically out and the friendship group all went with him. Yeah, I have had quite a significant cleansing of all my home friends. [...] I feel that having that time away from them, and the fact that I naturally prioritised my time with other people and not them. Also, the distance it gave me enough time to look back on how they reacted when I first came out and how much I had to overlook to keep that friendship going [...] Being an adult is respecting your own boundaries, and having the strength to enforce your own boundaries, but I have only been able to do that”. (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1)

James' emphasis on “boundaries” and the strength to “enforce” them resonates with the theories proposed by Marsden (2024) and Settersten and colleagues (2023), which argue that ‘unlinked lives’ come with significant consequences. For James, he is now having to exert considerable effort in determining who he wants to be friends with, and to be affirmative in this selectivity. His sexual identity also intersects with these decisions. During the pandemic, his experiences prompted him to reflect back on coming out to his friends and their reactions, which significantly influenced his choice to cut connections with certain individuals. Consequently, the pandemic has led to a renewed appreciation for friendships in James' life. More specifically, he wants to work on establishing an authentic friendship ethic with people in his hometown, a process that now involves continuously assessing who is safe and supportive to befriend (Hawkins et al., 2024; Weeks et al., 2001). It has also required James to work on being open and comfortable with the new people he has met throughout data collection, allowing close connections to be made without letting previous negative experiences of his friendship group hinder him from this. However, this has been a learning

process, characterised by efforts to mentally overcome the negative experiences he faced with previous friends in order to feel comfortable approaching new people. It was only in the final interview that he expressed feeling ready to re-establish a friendship network:

“It takes a while to let my guard down now. I feel I can move on from my old friendship group finally and start to make new friends”. (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 3)

To develop this strength and comfort in himself, he has had to develop the internal strength necessary to approach new, inclusive communities on his own and familiarise himself with others in those spaces. However, throughout data collection, he also expressed that approaching new spaces on his own has been another hurdle he has needed to overcome:

“It’s about not being discouraged to do something because you’ll be on your own doing it. I feel like people in general, specifically younger people, feel the pressure to not do something because they’ll be on their own. [...] It’s the message that is projected out is that doing things on your own is a faux pas which I don’t think is right”. (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 2)

For James, the pandemic can be understood as a ‘fateful’ moment (Giddens, 1991) due to the significant consequences it had for him and his friendships. As discussed in Chapter 5, participants had a selective narrative when discussing the formation of new friendships, and for James, the importance of this became prominent during the pandemic. Moreover, the critical moment of the pandemic can be viewed as a turning point (Denzin, 1989) regarding how he has consistently revisited his negative experiences with friends, influencing his approach to new people and environments.

### 7.2.3 Missed opportunities

For other participants, the pandemic coincided with the biographical moment of going to university, and this had implications for how friendships were developed.

As discussed in Chapter 5, participants emphasised the importance of quality over quantity in their adult friendships, and university serves as a social context where the process of refining these connections often takes place. However, for some participants, efforts to develop friendships at university were hindered by social distancing restrictions that limited how, where, and with whom they could interact, thereby hindering the quality of the connections they could establish. This challenge continues to impact their social experiences in a post-pandemic society. This relates with Settersten's (2015) theory that the social context in which individuals find themselves shapes the conditions under which social networks are accessed and developed. This situation is exemplified by Mollie, who started university in September 2020. She expressed a desire to "make friends for life" while at university and form a close LGBT+ friendship network, viewing it as an essential source of social support to talk about identity-related topics and navigating similar youth transitions together. Consequently, Mollie emphasised the importance of establishing a 'friendship ethic' with the people she would meet at university. However, the pandemic significantly hindered her ability to achieve this goal. While she has been able to form networks, she talked about how these connections are not as developed to the depth she would like:

"One thing that has really sucked is the fact that I have made good friends that I want to hang out with, but I haven't gotten my three years with them. [...] If the lockdown hadn't happened I could have been so much better friends with them, because I could have hung out with them so much more. I simply haven't gotten the opportunity to and it sucks, and that upsets me quite a lot because I do like these people. [...] It's one of those things you can't do much about". (21, ciswoman, lesbian, interview 1)

Struggling with making close friendships has also coincided with Mollie taking a placement year for the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of her degree, resulting in her relocating away from her university and friends. This has further hampered her ability to develop close connections with others, and she now feels that she will have to rush making those close connections when she returns for her final year:

“There’s now so much more pressure to get along with people more quickly. I had two years during the lockdown with a break in the middle, to essentially do what other people have 3 years with no break to do. That’s not ideal at all, it’s actually quite stressful”. (21, ciswoman, lesbian, interview 1)

In her reflections on friendships, Mollie emphasised that she has not had the necessary time or conditions to effectively establish a friendship ethic. This finding relates to the argument made by Weeks and colleagues (2001) that developing a friendship ethic requires ongoing effort. It is not a given; rather, it is a challenging process influenced by the social location in which one finds themselves. Research indicates that the lack of in-person interactions with friends has been widely perceived as a significant loss among young people (Craciun, 2024), a finding that resonates strongly with Mollie’s experiences. Consequently, the critical moment of starting university amid the pandemic can be interpreted as a ‘fatalistic moment’ (Thomson et al., 2002), reflecting how broader social circumstances have hindered her agency in developing meaningful connections. This critical moment continues to be revisited in terms of how Mollie sees the final year of her degree as her last opportunity to develop the connections she desires.

#### 7.3.4 Increased emotional dependency

For some participants, romantic relationships developed unusually under constrained circumstances, affecting their approaches to and experiences with friendships. Drawing on the theoretical framework established by Weeks et al. (2001) regarding egalitarian relationships and participants’ emphasis on its importance for adulthood (as discussed in Chapter 5), the pandemic significantly hampered the establishment of mutual care, equality, honesty, openness, and respect among individuals. Setty and Dobson (2023) argue that experiences of relationships are likely to have been significantly altered during the pandemic. However, they offer little consideration of the potential implications these

changes may have had on other biographical fields of individuals' lives. My research has been able to expand on this by demonstrating that some participants have become more dependent on their friends for receiving emotional support they were not getting from their romantic partners. Consequently, this challenges Padilla-Walker and Nelson's (2017) assertion that romantic relationships become the main focus during youth transitions, often leading to a decline in friendships. The pandemic underscored the equal importance of friendships in addressing relationship issues, as demonstrated in the accounts of Fi and Kate.

For Fi, she formed a romantic relationship with one of her friends during the pandemic, however the conditions in which this relationship developed were not conducive to establishing a healthy foundation for a relationship. She explained how her then-girlfriend was suffering from a significant bereavement during the pandemic, which Fi felt compelled to console her. That, mixed with the isolation Fi was also experiencing in relation to her own living situation, meant that a relationship formed between the two. However, Fi was entering this relationship with a lot of pressure placed on her to provide emotional support to her girlfriend beyond what she expected from a romantic relationship, especially given her girlfriend's inability to reciprocate that support. As a result, the pandemic hindered opportunities for developing an egalitarian relationship, with Fi explaining:

“The relationship with my ex was very much a product of the pandemic. I don't know if we would have gotten together without it. I definitely thought that I was going to be less happy in that relationship going forward [...] I think that the social isolation during the pandemic made me relieved to have contact with other people that I was more willing to compromise on what I wanted. I suppose I didn't want to lose something I just regained”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

For Kate, before the pandemic she was in a stable relationship with her now ex-wife, describing it as the most “intimate” and “open” relationship she had experienced. During the pandemic, Kate began to explore her gender identity and her wife was one of the first people she came out to as a transwoman during the

pandemic. However, Kate noted that this revelation shifted the dynamics of her relationship, necessitating that she limit her openness regarding her gender-related feelings, as her wife struggled to process this new information. Consequently, while Kate had initially established an egalitarian relationship within her marriage, this changed significantly following the critical moment of coming out. She explained:

“The thing with talking with Alice was that it was impacting how I was thinking about myself, right? I knew certain things would upset her, I knew that I was having to be quite sensitive about that. [...] It was 2 years of us not really having a sexual intimacy either”. (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

Both Fi and Kate experienced turbulent break-ups during data collection, influenced by how the pandemic affected the dynamics of their relationships. They both talked about how this significantly impacted their mental health, and how they have become emotionally dependent on their friends for support in new ways they have not had to navigate before. Consequently, the pandemic has introduced additional pressures to work on the friendship ethic with their friends in a post-pandemic society.

In light of their experiences, both Kate and Fi have reworked their adult identities to prioritise their close friendships. However, they also expressed anxiety about approaching their friends, fearing that they might be being emotional burdens. Throughout the data collection, their process has been one of working out how they express their needs to their friends honestly and openly, while finding a balance between what they talk about without placing a significant amount of emotional burden on their friends. Kate elaborated:

“I was really worried that I had so much anxiety that I was gonna be really intense to my friends”. (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 2)

Similarly for Fi:

“It’s very important knowing when one can self-regulate, and when one needs assistance with it, [it] has been a very big barrier to me. I really don’t like to reach out for help until things are very, very bad. I think that my recent experiences have

made that a bit better. I've become a little bit less averse to asking for assistance from other people". (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 3)

Overtime, Fi and Kate have focused on establishing a friendship ethic within their current social networks, learning to be more open with their friends. A crucial aspect of this process has been the commitment of their friends to provide emotional support. This relates with the argument made by Weeks et al. (2001) that developing a friendship ethics requires ongoing commitment and willingness from both oneself and others.

## 7.3 Realising the importance of inclusive communities

### 7.3.1 Missing out

Before the pandemic, participants engaged with a range of community-based spaces, influenced by their social location in other biographical fields. Some participants discussed that they had an even balance of engaging with in-person LGBT+ communities and leisure-based communities. This was mostly the case for participants who were still at university when the first lockdown occurred, as the university environment provided them with ample opportunities to engage with communities important to them. Others talked about how their community involvement mostly centred around LGBT+ communities, as they were living in locations where there were plentiful opportunities to engage with a range of LGBT+ events that centred around their interests, such as reading groups, drag events, and bars and clubs. Alternatively, some discussed that their community involvements centred around general leisure-based activities, as they were still living at home and/or in locations with limited access to LGBT+ communities.

With the lockdowns limiting access to community spaces, participants talked about the imbued isolation that this resulted in. Many participants emphasised that engaging with these spaces are important for how it breaks up their daily

routines, and serve as a way to manage and escape the stresses from other biographical fields, such as education and employment. For Charlie (18, cisman, gay, interview 1), the pausing of his school's orchestra during lockdown "was kind of hard because it was something just to break up the time". Engaging in community-based spaces is essential for helping and managing the process of 'becoming' adults, empirically developing Krzaklewska and Cuzzocrea's (2024) concept of 'oasis of youth' (see chapter 5). This disruption of routines and missing out on engagements made participants realise how important these engagements are for their daily lives and youth transitions. James, for instance, reflected on how the pandemic left his life too quiet, resulting in him recognising the importance of maintaining a balance between social and alone time:

"I felt like I had a lot of time to myself, and while I do like the quiet I now know how important it is to have more activities to do. After the pandemic I wanted to catch up and continue doing what I used to do". (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1)

The intersection of biographical fields, such as friendships and location, also contributed to why some participants experienced isolation during the pandemic and subsequently developed a renewed appreciation for communities. Some participants talked about how the pandemic resulted in a loss of friendships or caused existing connections to become more distant. As a result, they emphasised the role of communities as an important social resource in a post-pandemic society for rebuilding and fostering new friendships. James (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how in a post-pandemic society he wanted to engage in more leisure-based and LGBT+ communities to "branch out more again and make new friends. I want to get more into hobbies, and I guess more gay clubbing". Similarly, some participants reflected on how living in a rural location and having fewer opportunities to reach out to different in-person communities intensified their sense of isolation. This reinforced feelings of seclusion and detachment from social and cultural opportunities. Aspen, for example, spoke about how their location, combined with the lockdowns, deepened their sense of isolation:

“I felt really stuck. Really hemmed in. There was very little to mark the time passing and you lose sense of that a bit as well. There was no gigs or anything, or no opportunity to get involved with LGBT+ communities. Everything felt really dead. I remember it was getting to me because there is just nothing [...] it makes the world feel a lot less open”. (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

Some participants resorted to participating in online communities to address this sense of isolation and try to re-establish a positive daily routine, though this resulted in mixed experiences. For Josh, who was 15 years old at the start of the pandemic, he turned to online communities to break up the monotony of his day spent on online learning. However, he talked about how he was engaging in these activities from his bedroom, the same space where he completed his schoolwork, making his attempts to disrupt his daily routine feel superficial. This situation further exacerbated his sense of isolation and contributed to the feeling that his life was on hold:

“I was stuck at home in my bedroom, and you can’t really do much development in online communities in a couple of rooms, you’re not gonna learn many life skills and have many new experiences”. (18, transman, gay, interview 1)

In contrast, Chloe (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1) described her interactions with individuals from online LGBT+ communities and forums as feeling more “honest and open”, attributing this to the level of separation and anonymity that online spaces provide, which encouraged people to share more about themselves. However, she also noted that this created “a very different type of connection”. The lack of in-person interactions led her to question the authenticity of others’ communications, expressing concern that it was too easy to misinterpret messages which could escalate into arguments. Consequently, Chloe felt she needed to remain vigilant and carefully interpret what people were saying to her.

Furthermore, some participants began to reflect on, explore, and develop their identity/s during the pandemic, placing them in entirely new processes and experiences. This shift resulted in a renewed emphasis on approaching and engaging with in-person LGBT+ communities for support, guidance, and

information from like-minded individuals. For Kate, the loss of significant structure in her daily routine made her more aware of her feelings surrounding gender, which she described as “ramping up”. She dedicated more time to understanding these feelings and exploring her transgender identity. However, Kate faced limitations in available social resources and discussed the negative implications of seeking support online:

“I was watching a lot of YouTube and following a lot of people on Twitter who were trans, which I kind of regret doing now because you just see so much. I guess I was seeing a lot of people living their lives with similar feelings to me, but then also I was just seeing layers of transphobia. It kind of like came together as one package, it was partially helpful and unhelpful”. (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

For Kate, while engaging with LGBT+ communities remains important and is valued as an essential social and cultural resource, her focus has shifted exclusively to in-person spaces due to the added sense of safety they provide:

“Online comes with all of this online baggage. I do wish that I could have met with other people in-person earlier. It’s really important to actually be able to interact with people face-to-face”. (28, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

Similarly, both Josh (18, transman, gay) and Chloe (30, transwoman, pansexual), agreed that in-person communities offer higher quality interactions, facilitating stronger interpersonal connections compared to online spaces.

Some participants noted that the lockdowns coincided with significant cultural rites of passages associated with youth transitions, instilling a sense of missing out on social and cultural opportunities they hoped to engage with during that time. Josh (18, transman, gay, interview 1) reflected on how nothing occurred during his “sweet 16”, causing him to miss opportunities to attend house parties, meet new people, make new friends, and socially develop as an individual. He expressed feeling that he had lost “quite a few years of my lifetime” and had not experienced “a normal teenager experience”. Consequently, Josh emphasised his desire to make up for these missed opportunities in a post-pandemic society by actively engaging in leisure activities and connecting with new communities.

These findings empirically expand on Woodrow and Moore's (2021) argument that some young people were better positioned than others to navigate the loss of community. As discussed in Chapter 5, inclusive communities are essential for participants' youth transitions, providing a means to escape wider cis-heteronormative structures, connect with supportive and likeminded individuals, and engage in fulfilling leisure activities. The pandemic severely curtailed in-person opportunities for these interactions, exacerbating feelings of isolation and the sense of missing out on essential social and cultural resources. This demonstrates the significant impact that the loss of community had on LGBT+ young people. Although some participants attempted to address their isolation by turning to online platforms, they often found that these virtual connections did not offer the same quality of interaction. For some, this shift provided detrimental to their mental health and sense of self due to the nature of their online engagements.

### 7.3.2 New priorities, difference in opportunities

The imbued isolation resulting from the pandemic, coupled with feelings of unfulfillment from online communities and missed opportunities, led most participants to express a desire to prioritise engagement with in-person communities and explore new opportunities in a post-pandemic society. For example, Chloe (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1) expressed her wish to "get out more and meet more people again", emphasising her desire for a life filled with activities that "actually matter and are enjoyable" to her. Participants talked about wanting to work on making this lifestyle an embedded feature of their youth transitions and adulthood. James also reflected on this realisation, noting his eagerness to focus on being more active and engaged in a post-pandemic society:

"That extent of social isolation was extreme for everyone, it was quite a significant event not being able to leave my room for months on end and just not

being able to see anyone during that time was really difficult. So after the pandemic I wanted to catch up really and do a lot more than what I really used to. Branching out elsewhere I don't think that would have happened without the pandemic". (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 1)

For James, like many other participants, there was a re-prioritisation of how he interacts with spaces; he expressed a desire to be in places where he can engage in face-to-face interactions. This relates to the above finding on online communities, whereby the pandemic served as a moment that made participants realise in-person communities are inherently better in quality than online. These findings also resonate with Rasmussen et al.'s (2023) study, which found that young people are re-evaluating how they want to spend their time in a post-pandemic society, showing a greater intentionality toward participating in meaningful physical communities. Most participants discussed their re-prioritisation as achieving an even balance between engaging with both in-person LGBT+ and inclusive communities. Understanding this through a youth transitions lens, this suggests that participants are seeking to take control over their lives by establishing new priorities for developing their adult identities. However, as with most studies exploring the pandemic such as Rasmussen et al.'s (2023), research has been exploratory and does not explore whether young people have successfully engaged with the social and cultural opportunities linked to these new priorities.

By adopting a qualitative longitudinal approach, this study has uncovered differences in the social and cultural opportunities available to participants in a post-pandemic society. Some participants expressed a lost sense of community in LGBT+ spaces they used to be a part of. Some feel that spaces have become more homogenous, with attendees now predominantly consisting of individuals of similar ages or familiar faces, leading to a decline in the heterogeneity they valued. Chloe (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1) emphasised how she really appreciated the diversity in these spaces, which allowed her to be "introduced to more people through those events socially". However, since coming back into those spaces, she observed that people were keeping apart

from one another, making it less likely for new individuals to join, resulting in fewer “happenstance opportunities”. Consequently, Chloe now feels disconnected in LGBT+ spaces, as the ways she previously interacted and found enjoyment within those spaces has changed. Similarly, Oscar discussed his own re-engagement LGBT+ communities:

“It feels like a community has been gutted. I’ve not done anything since, it’s almost a new world now. It’s very sort of party heavy. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, but it just makes me feel like it is just so different to how I knew it. Perhaps I’m an old dog now, when I should stay home and reminisce”. (28, cisman, gay, interview 1)

As discussed in Chapter 5, participants value the egalitarian generational structure in LGBT+ spaces and having a sense of connection with others. However, Oscar’s reference to himself as an “old dog” who should “reminisce” indicates that he feels the loss of the egalitarian generational structure has heightened his feelings of difference and exclusion, fostering a nostalgic view of pre-pandemic LGBT+ communities and the engagement opportunities they offered (Pople, 2015). Both Chloe and Oscar have approached inclusive communities centred around specific interests, such as pottery classes and comedy clubs, as alternative means of re-engaging with communities. Nonetheless, their desire to remain part of LGBT+ communities remains strong, indicating that while their values have not changed, their ability to act on them continues to be affected.

Some participants have been unable to engage with LGBT+ communities due to living in rural locations, which limit their access to social and cultural opportunities (Formby, 2017; Marlin et al., 2023). This has coincided with how the pandemic has impacted employment, affecting their living situations and mobility. As a result, the pandemic has placed additional pressures on developing financial independence and moving out, resulting in them having to be financially selective about their social and cultural engagements and having to stay local. This finding relates to arguments made by Hoff (2023) that there is a complex relationship between culture and economy. Participants’ aspirations

for independence are constrained by their economic realities, necessitating a re-prioritisation of their cultural practices. This issue has been exacerbated by the need to travel to larger cities to access LGBT+ communities, which is financially unfeasible. For instance, James expressed his desire to save up to purchase a home while balancing the need to budget carefully over his cultural engagements, highlighting the intersection of financial constraints and cultural aspirations:

“I have to take stock of all my pots and I have a leisure budget. If there’s too much leisure and I spend too much, I have to cut back”. (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 2)

Throughout data collection, James’ approach to re-engaging in communities in a post-pandemic society has mostly focused on local, leisure-based activities. This focus is clearly reflected in his scrapbook, where his entries centre around engaging in leisure activities organised by local community centres (see below two scrapbook entries on attending local music concerts).



Figure 10: James' scrapbook entry which includes scraps and tickets from local gigs he has attended.

While James feels these spaces are inclusive and accepting of his identity, he still wants to access LGBT+ exclusive communities. However, this is having to be put

on hold until he can move to a more urban area. It is well-documented that the location of an LGBT+ young person living in the UK significantly influences their opportunities to engage with LGBT+ communities, with urban living becoming increasingly expensive before the pandemic (Government Equalities Office, 2019). The additional financial pressures have forced participants, like James, to prioritise financial independence over community engagement, further limiting their cultural and social opportunities.

While the previous two points are about an imbalance between engagement with LGBT+ communities and alternative inclusive spaces, some participants also noted an imbalance in the amount of time spent with communities – either too much or too little. Fisher’s (2012 in McPherson, 2024) concept of ‘hauntology’ is useful for theoretically exploring how the pandemic’s past continues to shape present community interactions. Some participants expressed that, due to missed social and cultural moments during the pandemic, they now dedicate more time to catching up on these lost opportunities. However, this has been at the expense of how much time they spend on other fields such as their education. For example, Josh reflected on how the lockdowns deprived him of a “normal teenage experience”. This finding relates Bristow and Gilland’s (2020) argument that young people have sacrificed much of their social and personal developing due to the pandemic. Josh feels that moving to university has been the first opportunity for him to catch up on those missed experiences. However, there was a cautious narrative behind how he talked about this catching up:

“I wish I could have all these stories to tell about when I was 16 doing dumb shit. But I will never have those stories. I guess I’m making up for it now by going out more often than I probably should, and making all these stories. I’m kind of focused on the present. [...] If I had all those experiences at 16, maybe I’d chill out a bit now. I’m definitely out more often than I should be, it is unhealthy to be out so much. If I had all those experiences before, maybe I wouldn’t feel the need to do this as much, or to cram all these experiences now. So I guess it definitely is still affecting me in that way”. (18, transman, gay, interview 1)

On the other hand, some participants talked about having COVID anxiety (Flaskerud, 2022), which made them cautious about using public transport or re-entering community spaces with large gatherings. As a result, their re-engagement with communities has taken longer than anticipated. For example, during the period between my first and second interview with James (March – August 2023), he shared that he had only recently begun to branch out and engage with various communities:

“I was taking baby steps back out into the world again, I didn’t rush back out and I wanted to get used to spreading out again into the public space. I am hearing about the other variant in the news which is making me feel nervous because its now a different experience going out”. (23, cisman, bisexual, interview 2)

James is now more selective about the size of the communities he engages with, limiting his involvement to just one or two communities, a stark contrast to his initial goal of wanting to “branch out more”. This change aligns with findings by Clarke and Carter (2023), which highlight that the ongoing impact of the pandemic on young people’s mental health continues to shape their post-pandemic lives. This research expands on their findings by examining how these mental health challenges influence cultural and social opportunities. James expressed that while he is gradually getting used to engaging with communities again, he is acutely aware of COVID’s continued presence in society. His anxiety heightens when he sees news reports of rising case numbers and new variants. Although he desires to expand his social circles, this COVID anxiety restricts his confidence in doing so (Flaskerud, 2022).

Scott and colleagues (2023) emphasised the need for long-term research to focus on young people’s social and cultural lives in a post-pandemic society. This research addresses that gap by revealing the variations in social and cultural opportunities available to participants. These findings are also interesting for thinking about how participants narrated how they want their youth transitions to progress. The majority of participants discussed that becoming an adult involves multiple developmental processes occurring simultaneously. They expressed a desire for a healthy balance in these processes, particularly in their engagement

with inclusive communities. Participants emphasised the significance of balancing interactions between LGBT+ and inclusive communities. However, this research indicates that the pandemic has disrupted this balance, raising important questions about how these disruptions affect the development and affirmation of adult identities (Young et al., 2014). In the next section, I will revisit Aspen's case history from Chapter 6 to explore how their opportunities for engaging with inclusive communities have been impacted and what this means for their youth transitions.

### 7.3.3 Aspen – Still figuring out adulthood

Aspen is a non-binary bisexual. At the time of the first interview, they were 20 years old and unemployed. They were unemployed throughout the pandemic, unable to find a job and still seeking employment when I first met them. Aspen's unemployment status has also had significant implications for the biographical fields of location and lifestyle. They live in a rural village in the southwest of England with their mum and siblings. They articulated a strong dislike for their current location, regarding it as a "sleepy town", and a "weird place" as "nothing actually happens", there is "no centre", and is a "mess of it all". At this point, they looked to their current location as a hindering factor to being able to access any social and cultural opportunities that they desired.

Aspen's narrative about adulthood reflects a common theme among participants in this study, emphasising difference and uncertainty. They talked about how there is a lack of a cultural reference or narrative around LGBT+ adult identities, and that is affecting how they understand their own adulthood. This absence is contributing to a feeling of confusion as they are still constructing and working out their own adult identity. Aspen emphasised the importance of engaging with other LGBT+ individuals and meeting likeminded others to get an insight into what LGBT+ adulthoods can look like. They noted that without these connections, the

construction of their adult identity might not resonate with their true desires and aspirations for adulthood:

“I don’t have an archetype or something to push for. I don’t have any narrative of what I should be, or anything like that. It’s something I’m currently trying to find out but I think it feels like one of those things that I’m only going to realise through experience. I think there’s a tendency in people where they instruct a system in their head, an idea in their head, that they push towards. I don’t know if I can do that. If I did, I know that it would be quite wrong”.

Aspen envisioned relocating to an urban area, describing it as a place “where stuff happens”, to unlock social and cultural opportunities. They hoped to engage with LGBT+ communities, meet new LGBT+ people, and develop new friendships within these spaces. Moreover, they sought more opportunities to participate in leisure activities they enjoy but currently have limited access to.

As such, Aspen’s case presents a clear challenge to Arnett’s (2007) ‘emerging adulthood’ theory, which posits that young people can independently construct their adult identities, and it is a highly individualised process. In Aspen’s case, the lack of a broader cultural narrative on LGBT+ adult identities and limited access to social and cultural resources has hindered their agency to self-construct their adult identity. Instead, they emphasised the importance of relational and cultural factors in supporting this process. This finding further adds to MacDonald and Shildrick’s (2007) argument that culture, structure, and agency interact with each other and can shape the direction of youth transitions.

As discussed in Chapter 6 regarding the impact of the pandemic on Aspen’s employment, finding a job became significantly more challenging during the lockdowns. By the time of the first interview, Aspen’s job search approach had shifted, leading them to specifically seek out more precarious forms of work just to get a step into employment. This shift began to affect their prospects of moving to an urban area, as they recognised the risk of becoming trapped in their current rural location, contingent upon the type of work they could secure and the financial independence they could develop from that. Despite these challenges, Aspen maintained a hopeful narrative about what they would like to happen in 12

months' time when data collection finished. They expressed a strong desire to secure employment that would enable them to relocate to an urban area. Thus, they wanted to have an even balance of critical moments occurring across the 12 months of data collection that would give them a sense of progress with their youth transitions (Lanctot and Poulin, 2024). This further indicates that they viewed securing precarious work as a potential step up into a permanent, more stable form of employment, allowing them to move away:

“I'd like to find some decent work and I'd like to get the hell out of here, meet some people, expand my social pool a lot. I want to get things moving again”.

By the time of the second interview, Aspen was still unemployed and living at home. They had made the difficult decision to pause their job search due to its negative impacts on their mental health, prioritising mental wellbeing before resuming their employment search. This shift in perspective was notable. Unlike their previous optimism, Aspen now felt less hopeful about immediate changes in their circumstances, as their poor mental health was hindering any progress toward finding a job and moving out:

“Employment and moving out is just, what do I even do at the moment?”

Moreover, when we met for the second interview, Aspen's engagement with communities had not changed significantly due to their financial constraints. They were beginning to branch out again, primarily focusing on local gigs with friends, which were easily accessible by bus. These smaller venues were particularly important for Aspen, as they provided inclusive and safe environments to escape the daily stressors of life and enjoy time with friends. However, they expressed frustration about not attending these events as frequently as they would like, having to carefully manage their budget to cover living expenses at home.

Furthermore, Aspen had not been able to participate in any LGBT+ communities, re-emphasising again that these opportunities are clustered in urban spaces. Their limited finances made them hesitant to travel further afield to access these social and cultural opportunities, as it not only reduced their financial budget but

also posed a risk of disappointment in the new communities, especially when they already knew they enjoyed the smaller local gigs:

“I’ve got to really hope that whatever I might be going to, or going to do, is something that I’m gonna enjoy, I’m gonna have a good time with because it’s got to be a full day thing, really, having to travel”.

Aspen expressed concerns that travelling to an urban area for the day would re-emphasise how isolated and locked out they were from accessing the social and cultural opportunities they want. They feared that this experience would trigger negative emotions and lead to rumination about their current circumstances:

“I don’t want to sit and obsess over it and dig myself into a hole of feeling worse about it. I feel like I’m making big compromises already, and I don’t feel like that would be very productive”.

At the time of the second interview, Aspen felt that their understanding of what they want their adulthood to look like had not become any clearer since the first interview, reiterating that they never had a “clear grasp on it anyway”. This further re-emphasised the critical role of LGBT+ communities in helping them construct a narrative around their adulthood. Thus, this finding relates to the argument made in Chapter 5, which argues that inclusive communities are important for escaping from wider stressors, yet they are less likely to be cultural resources that help investments into adult identities for LGBT+ young people. Aspen’s ongoing narrative of uncertainty suggests that no meaningful investments into their adult identity have been made so far.

At the third interview, Aspen’s engagement with communities had shifted again. Previously, they had been struggling with an uneven balance between inclusive and LGBT+ communities; however, by this point, their involvement in inclusive communities had decreased significantly. This change was largely influenced by their ongoing unemployment and worsening mental health. When we met for the third interview, Aspen reported that their mental health had deteriorated to the extent that it was affecting their sleep routine. Consequently, they decided to postpone their job search to focus on seeking help from their GP to improve their

mental health. While Aspen had been working on re-establishing a routine for engaging with inclusive communities at the second interview, their participation had now become inconsistent. They explained:

“My engagement has been spotty. Sometimes I’ve been doing really good getting myself to do things a lot more intentionally and to put more effort into the things I do for fun. Sometimes I’ve been really disappointed in my ability to not put more in. I have realised quite recently I haven’t been to see a band or anything in ages. [...] I think a lot it is that when there’s roadblocks, maybe when I’m just having a really brain fuzzy day, I struggle to keep the will and commitment to whatever it is I’m trying to do”.

As such, the lack of progress happening in Aspen’s life had significant negative implications for their mental health. Lanctot and Poulin (2024) argue that having a lack of critical moments occurring during youth transitions can affect the sense of self, with this clearly being the case for Aspen. Moreover, negative mental health was predicted as a significant long-term impact of the pandemic, especially for LGBT+ young people (Clarke and Carter, 2023). Aspen’s case illustrates how poor mental health has impacted the social and cultural opportunities they have been able to access.

At the time of the third interview, Aspen had attended their “very first queer event” describing it as “very, very cool” and something they “really loved”. However, this event was a one-off occurrence hosted in their local area, and beyond that, they had not been able to further engage with LGBT+ communities. Consequently, Aspen felt they were still struggling to construct a coherent adult narrative or understand what their adulthood should look like, leaving their narrative still centred around uncertainty and ambiguity.

In the final interview, it became evident that Aspen’s hope of securing employment and relocating had significantly diminished. Thus, the critical moment of the first lockdown, along with its economic impacts, has been highly consequential and fatalistic for how it has hindered Aspen’s approach to their living situation, location, and lifestyle (Thomson et al., 2002). By the third interview, Aspen’s narrative had shifted from one of ambition and self-

development to an acceptance of the reality that they might not be able to develop a coherent sense of self. They explained:

“What my path forward is, matching up all of what I want it to look like and what can it really look like, figuring out where it all goes to be honest feels difficult. It feels quite ephemeral, quite unclear still. Getting there it seems very far away, which makes it difficult to really grapple with it. It feels like the things that I’ve made progress on have been blocked or hit by another problem that stops me from getting past the first steps. It does start to feel a bit further away”.

Evans’ (2002) concept of ‘bounded agency’ is useful here for thinking about how post-pandemic opportunity structures have resulted in a social inequality of aspirations for Aspen. This gap between Aspen’s expectations and reality stems from a lack of critical moments occurring, resulting in a misalignment between their current social location and their ability to invest in their adult identity (Coleman, 2011). Consequently, Aspen is now having to readjust their expectations to what they think will realistically happen in their youth transitions.

This finding is also significant for thinking about current theories on how wider structures affect the development of adult narratives. Scholars such as Evans (2002), Henderson et al. (2007), and Kogler et al. (2024) argue that narratives get re-written towards assimilation and conforming to default individualisation. These studies suggest that young people still retain some understanding of their narratives about adulthood. However, these studies have been based on social class and offer limited insights into how these theories apply to LGBT+ young people. As the above quote demonstrates, Aspen’s narrative continues to be marked by uncertainty and ambiguity, similar to what was expressed in the first interview. This indicates that Aspen is navigating the transition to adulthood without a clear sense of their adult identity. Consequently, this finding presents an alternative perspective on theories of inequalities in aspirations that young people still retain some understanding of their narratives about adulthood after they get re-written (Evans, 2002; Henderson et al., 2007; Kogler et al., 2024). For Aspen, despite experiencing structural challenges, they continue to grapple with the ambiguity of their narratives about adulthood. Overall, the complexities of

Aspen's case illustrates that the challenges LGBT+ youth face are not just about aspirations but also about the formation of coherent narratives. Furthermore, Aspen's case is typical of those found in other studies that argue the location a LGBT+ young person is situated can determine what social and cultural opportunities they have access to (Casey, 2004; Wenham et al., 2023). This finding calls for further research into how, if at all, rural LGBT+ young people perceive the ability to obtain an adult identity and develop a coherent sense of self.

## 7.4 Conclusion

As discussed in Chapter 5, 'Close and supportive connections' and 'Access to inclusive communities' were discussed by participants as key adulthood markers, essential for accessing the social and cultural resources needed to invest in their adult identities. In this chapter, I argue that the pandemic was a key moment whereby adult identities in relation to friendship and communities have been re-worked to one where more importance has been placed on them. The over-arching argument in this chapter is that opportunities to work on these adult identities continue to be shaped by how participants were impacted by the pandemic, both positively and negatively. Moreover, participants' experiences varied based on their social location within other biographical fields, such as employment, education, and geographic location. This variation illustrates how different biographical fields intersect, with one's position in one field influencing access to social, material, and cultural resources in another (Henderson et al., 2007).

# Chapter 8 – Identity exploration

## 8.1 Introduction

In this final empirical chapter, I focus on the adulthood marker ‘Thriving in identity’. It explores how the pandemic impacted the process of developing confidence in participants’ gender identity, and how they are continuing to navigate those impacts in a post-pandemic society. The pandemic resulted in a difference in experience for identity development depending on what happened to them at an intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural level. While some participants discovered new information about their identity, others felt that the pandemic delayed their progress or limited opportunities for self-discovery. This chapter focuses exclusively on transgender identity, as participants who identified as transgender most frequently highlighted the ongoing impact of the pandemic on their gender identity. In contrast, participants who identified as LGB+ but not transgender tended to focus more on other biographical fields such as employment, education, and living situation when discussing the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. When prompted about sexual identity, many described how they had already explored their sexuality and developed a positive sense of self before the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic did not have significant implications for this process. The implications of this for this research and potential avenues for future research are discussed in the Conclusion chapter.

The chapter has been split into two sections. The first section, ‘Pressure to pass’, will explore how participants are now experiencing additional challenges of closely monitoring their gender expressions. This is a result of the doubt and anxiety over whether they pass as their gender to others, influenced by experiences of the pandemic. The second section will bring in Kate’s case history, one of my participants whose experiences reflect a pattern within the broader data of shared experiences of the pandemic regarding her gender identity. This

section will also bring in examples from Kate's scrapbook to illustrate how she has navigated the process of thriving in a post-pandemic society. The moments captured in her scrapbook acted as case studies, enabling her to reflect deeply on her experiences and emotions throughout the data collection process. These reflections provoked interesting discussions about the complexities of developing confidence in her gender identity and how it intersected with her sexual identity. By focusing on what I have called 'micro processes,' which were recorded in participants' scrapbooks and explored through prompting interview techniques, I was able to have a detailed and comprehensive discussion with participants. Therefore, scrapbooking as a method worked well in comprehensively capturing the social and cultural lives of participants in a post-pandemic society, demonstrating how scrapbooking effectively complemented the qualitative longitudinal methodology.

## 8.2 Pressure to pass

### 8.2.1 Taking advantage of the lockdowns

For some participants, they used the lockdowns in a positive and constructive way to think about and/or work on their gender identity and expression. Some discovered they were transgender during the pandemic, as the lockdowns provided them with more time and privacy to explore underlying feelings they had previously avoided. Thus, it was during this time that they started the first process of developing a personal identity (D'Augelli, 1994) by exploring, questioning and working out their thoughts and feelings around gender. For others, they had discovered that they were transgender just before the pandemic. However, they faced new challenges navigating cisnormative structures from a different positionality that they had not experienced beforehand. This hindered how comfortable and confident they felt working on their gender expressions. As discussed in Chapter 5, one of the first processes that participants discussed as

important for thriving in their identity is to navigate wider cis-heteronormative structures and getting to a point where these no longer have a significant impact on their sense of self. The pandemic, for some, eased this pressure by reducing the influence of societal gaze, depending on how participants' social contexts shifted during the lockdowns and how comfortable they felt working on this process. Consequently, this separation from wider cisnormative structures provided some participants their first opportunity to experiment with their gender expression in a more private and comfortable space.

For some, the lockdowns became a 'fateful' moment (Giddens, 1991), providing a constructive opportunity to engage in identity work and discover more about their gender identity. This was the case for Chloe, who realised she was non-binary just before the pandemic but had only come out to her wife and close friends. She did not feel comfortable developing a social identity and changing her gender expression, touching upon how binary understandings of gender hindered her from doing this:

"I was less out and open at that time and it was still a very new thing for me. So day to day I wasn't in the place to, like I still fitted in with those spaces to a degree, there was a version of me that got by in those spaces. But I did start to notice and pick up on things that I maybe hadn't done before in the way that people talk about other people that are different to them, or the level of assumption into who and how people are like. [...] You start to pick up on these kinds of assumptions of normality when there is such a broad and diverse spectrum. It made me realise how obsessively gendered everything is. [...] Trying to explore who I was in such a binary gendered environment was difficult and I couldn't put a lot of thought into it". (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

When the first lockdown was introduced, Chloe explained how she no longer had a physical presence in social contexts that reinforced binary gender norms. Instead, she found herself in a supportive and affirming space at home with her wife, who not only encouraged her to explore her gender identity but was also keen to develop their own understanding of diverse gender identities. Chloe

talked about the profound impact this supportive environment had on her, ultimately leading her to the realisation that she is a transwoman:

“Being in my own place and space with my wife was very freeing and liberating. I could feel parts of myself unlocking and experiencing joy that I hadn’t experienced before. It gave me, I suppose, a further amount of time to again look inwards and explore in a pandemic lockdown world about myself, and who I was because I was being afforded that opportunity, whereas before that wasn’t so prevalent. Essentially all of those spaces went away, which I actually think did help me express and explore more because that wasn’t a day to day going outside and seeing what reactions were. I could experiment and explore in safety. A part of me thinks that without the lockdown I may not have been able to explore as far or as much as I had done and realise how feminine I was”. (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

Chloe looked back at the lockdown through a positive lens regarding her gender identity, as it provided her with the opportunity to learn more about herself and make significant progress in her identity development, which she described as “joyful” and “euphoric”. She made the most of being in an affirmative social context, relying on her wife as an important social resource that allowed her to engage in this identity work. Chloe’s experience highlights how intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural factors interacted to create a space where she could thrive and explore her gender identity (Fish et al., 2020).

As discussed in Chapter 5, participants emphasised the importance of social transitions in building confidence in their gender identity. These transitions often involve experimenting with gender expression to conform to societal expectations of femininity or masculinity, so that individuals feel assured they will be perceived and referred to by others as the gender they self-identify with and express. For trans participants, reducing doubt and anxiety about how they are perceived was discussed as essential to thriving in their identity. Some participants used the lockdowns and the separation from others as an opportunity to relax their focus on gender expression. Consequently, they were not closely monitoring the clothing that they wore, how they did their makeup, or their hairstyles, as they were in a social context where their gendered expressions

did not significantly impact how others would refer to them. For instance, Josh (18, gay, interview 1) is a transman and talked about how wearing a chest binder can be uncomfortable at times, and he must closely monitor how often he wears it for health reasons. During the pandemic, living with his parents who already knew he was transgender meant that he did not have to wear his chest binder as it was only his parents who would be seeing him. Similarly, Abbie (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1) lived with her then-girlfriend during the second and third lockdowns. She talked about the stress of constantly having to do her makeup and hair before the pandemic to ensure she passed as a woman, highlighting how difficult it was to master techniques like eyeliner. The lockdowns allowed her to take a break from this pressure and relax her approach to her gender expression. These findings demonstrate that while social transitions are meaningful for the outcomes they produce, they can also be a stressful time, requiring constant attention to gender expression to meet societal expectations. Some participants used the lockdowns as a respite from these pressures, allowing themselves to enjoy being in their gendered bodies without anxiety over others' perceptions. In doing so, they exercised their agency, using the lockdowns as a positive and constructive opportunity for personal benefit (Giddens, 1991).

### 8.2.2 Delayed gender transitions

However, not all participants had a positive experience regarding how their gender transitions (social and/or medical) were impacted by the pandemic. The challenges they faced depended on several factors, including changes in their interpersonal relationships, the limitations placed on opportunities to connect with supportive communities and networks, and restricted access to gender-affirming care.

As discussed in Chapter 5, a key aspect of participants' social transitions involves developing a social identity (D'Augelli, 1994). This process includes reaching out to supportive friends, partner/s, and LGBT+ communities to seek

advice, guidance, and feedback on how to adapt and express their gender. These social interactions help participants assess whether their gender expression conforms to societal expectations and provide a sense of validation. However, some participants ended up living in unsupportive living environments during the lockdowns, which significantly impacted their social transitions. This relates to findings from other studies that highlight how the pandemic affected identity development for LGBT+ young people (Hudson et al., 2021; LGBT Hero, 2021). For some, they had to conceal their gender identity entirely and revert to expressing a gender they did not identify with. This was the case for Fi, who, after moving to university and leaving her mum's house, was able to explore her gender identity and come out as a transwoman. During this time, she established a close and supportive network of transgender friends and relied on them for advice on how she could express herself more femininely, explaining:

“At the beginning of my transition I made an effort to wear a lot of more feminine clothing. So I bought a lot of dresses and skirts during that time, and I didn't really know what I was doing and it was okay. I wore those out and about sometimes, and I could learn from others for what they had gone through”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

During the first lockdown, Fi ended up living with her mum who she did not feel comfortable coming out to. She explained that her mum is generally unsupportive, and she feared that coming out would result in her gender identity being invalidated. As a result, Fi had to suppress all feminine expressions while living at home, which she described as having a profoundly negative impact on her wellbeing and sense of self:

“It was very bad because I wasn't out to my mum. I was required to present in a way that didn't arouse suspicion or something was off, but in a way that she wouldn't question me about it. I was forced to continue to go with the flow and accept use of my old name and being referred to as a boy. [...] I completely closed up for that entire period, and it was hard. It was a very hard time while I was there with my mum”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

Similarly, Aspen shared that they had come out as non-binary just before the pandemic. However, they had limited opportunities to explore and express their gender identity due to being geographically restricted from accessing LGBT+ communities. During the pandemic, Aspen felt increasingly “wrapped up in” their gender identity, with a strong desire to work on their gender expression. Despite this, they struggled to find much value or connection in online communities, which further hindered their ability to explore their identity. They explained:

“I figured more stuff out, and it became more wanting to act on it and what not in whatever ways. Obviously you can’t go out and it’s really difficult to find ways to do that. [...] I’ve found I never really found much in the way of actually helpful online resources. I definitely tried to find some of them, but never actually really did. [...] It was kind of weird because you’re reconstructing your identity in a way that you want others to think about you and all of that, but it was throwing stuff and thoughts at the wall. [...] It meant a lot of sitting there and introspection that was completely pointless, because I didn’t have anything to immediately use that introspection for, or to springboard that”. (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1)

Aspen explained how this was especially challenging for them, as they were unsure how to pass as non-binary, making feedback from others even more necessary. This relates to arguments made in Chapter 3, where transgender theory postulates that understandings of gender are based on a rigid, binary system of knowledge (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). Therefore, individuals who construct gender identities outside this binary structure can face additional challenges, as their gender identity can be questioned and invalidated by others. For Aspen, developing a social identity and reaching out to LGBT+ networks for feedback was even more important to avoid those difficulties. However, in the above quote, Aspen discussed how the pandemic hindered their ability to gauge whether they were forming a coherent social identity, as they did not receive the constructive feedback they had hoped for from online communities. While they experimented with different gender expressions during the pandemic, this was in a private sense, leading them to navigate this process without clear guidance and contributing to their feelings of uncertainty. This further underscores why

participants have expressed a stronger preference for in-person LGBT+ communities, as explored in Chapter 7.

Some participants had come out as transgender before the pandemic and had already started working on their social transitions. For some, their next step was to proceed with medical transitions through hormone therapy to develop gendered physical features. This process was considered essential for building confidence in their gender identity and feeling assured that they would pass as their self-identified gender to others. Alternatively, some participants who had started to work on their social transitions during the pandemic also decided to pursue medical transitions soon after. However, their efforts to seek medical transitions coincided with the pandemic. As discussed in Chapter 5, participants emphasised the importance of having their medical transitions handled efficiently and consistently, without lengthy waiting periods for prescriptions. The majority of participants prioritised approaching the NHS Gender Identity Clinics (GICs) for both financial reasons and a belief that NHS services would provide safer and more positive encounters with knowledgeable medical professionals. This support was crucial in reducing the burden of researching what hormones and dosages they should be taking. Additionally, some participants expressed interest in using the services offered with gender affirmative care, such as voice therapy, as this is something they could not do on their own and needed help with. Thus, the relational aspect of medical transitions was heavily emphasised by participants as a critical component to their overall experience.

However, during the pandemic the NHS was overburdened, resulting in other services being deprioritised and waiting lists increasing as a result (Jowett, 2020; Phillips, 2021). Gender affirmative care was one of those services that got scaled back, and participants talked about the challenges they faced approaching the NHS to get a referral to the GIC during the pandemic. Many talked about the long waiting list that they knew they were joining, feeling overwhelmed with how long it would take them before they could start accessing hormone therapy. This prolonged wait not only added to their anxiety but also further eroded their access to intimate citizenship rights and control over their bodies (Plummer,

2005). Some participants also talked about how the process of getting a referral became increasingly relentless during the pandemic, leading to a more frustrating experience than they had initially anticipated. Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1) talked about how she missed the preliminary referral appointment with her doctor and got placed on the bottom of the waiting list, explaining how “it really, really put me off even trying again, because the relative benefits of the NHS are now very, very long processes and waiting lists and are just not worth it”. Abbie (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 1) had a similar experience too, talking about how her doctor tried to call her for an appointment and she missed it, “so they stuck me on the back of the waiting list, and said you’ll have to reapply at this point”. Abbie emphasised the importance of receiving voice therapy for how she approached her other youth transition applying for work after she finished university. She explained that she did not want to be identified as transgender during jobs interviews, and that voice therapy was necessary for this, which she wanted to receive while at university. However, by being placed at the bottom of the waiting list, she explained:

“I was sort of having to accept that I’ll just keep transitioning whilst I go into the workforce and I won’t have voice therapy by that point. I was hoping to have it done before I finished university”. (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1)

For Abbie, a stable sense of self was key to feeling competent in developing her economic adult identity (Henderson et al., 2007). This partly involved relying on support from medical professionals. However, the unexpected delay in receiving voice therapy left her feeling less confident about approaching job interviews and uncertain about her job prospects. This delay in her medical transitions was already undermining her sense of competency entering the biographical field of employment before had even begun.

Some participants even talked about how the long waiting lists and limited resources reinforced their sense of difference, and their rights and needs for bodily autonomy not being taken seriously at the state level. Chloe, for instance, was referred to the NHS GIC in 2021, one year after she started working on her social transitions. She talked about the impact of seeing the waiting times:

“Seeing the wait times and the number of patients that actually get seen through the NHS GIC’s. If it was any other department people would be in uproar”. (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

For Chloe, the lack of uproar and urgency in improving transgender healthcare highlights the gap between the importance she places on these services and how the rest of society does not place equal importance on it. Similarly, Jesse (23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) noted that having only one GIC in the north of England makes obtaining a referral “more of a nightmare than what it should be”. They suggested that these challenges could be addressed by establishing more GICs, but the lack of political will to do so, coupled with a decline in healthcare standards during the pandemic, reinforced their concerns. Jesse also feared the additional challenges they would face approaching the NHS GIC as a non-binary person, on top of long waiting lists and limited resources. They talked about how they wanted to take hormone replacement on a low dosage “so that it just sort of makes me look more androgynous than anything”. They talked about how it is likely their GP will refer them to see a therapist before referring them to a GIC. However, they felt they would have to convince a therapist more so than usual that microdosing is genuinely what they need and that they are “not just following a trend”. This relates to Hines and colleagues’ (2017) argument regarding transgender citizenship, which highlights how wider institutions have been slow to adapt their practices and structures beyond a binary understanding of gender. In healthcare, staff can gatekeep access to gender-affirming healthcare, offering them only to those whose gender expressions match their gender identity (Carlile, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). Jesse is already facing delays in seeing a GP and anticipates additional challenges related to gatekeeping and the understanding of non-binary identities by medical professionals.

### 8.2.3 Pressure of passing

Despite the clear differences in how participants' gender identities were impacted by the pandemic, coming into a post-pandemic society the majority of participants' narratives centred around the pressure to pass. This relates to the need to renavigate cisnormative structures and the expectation that one's gender identity should conform to societal expectations regarding gender expression and performance (Butler, 1990, 2006). As discussed in Chapter 5, participants discussed that they want to thrive in their identity throughout adulthood. This involves feeling comfortable being consistent in how they express their gender at a public level and not having to alter it for fear of negative backlash. Similarly, it is about feeling confident that their gendered expressions will be perceived as the gender they self-identify with by others. However, the impacts of the pandemic resulted in participants feeling uncomfortable and anxious about being consistent in expressing their gender identity publicly and/or about their confidence in passing as their self-identified gender. Clarke and Carter (2023) warn that LGBT+ young people may encounter additional challenges in a post-pandemic society, depending on how significant their identity development was impacted by the pandemic. This research has revealed these additional challenges and highlighted clear differences in participants' responses based on the resources they have been able to access.

For participants who talked about how they used the pandemic as an opportunity to work on their social transitions, they talked about how post-pandemic they have heightened anxiety about re-entering society with a new identity. Returning to Chloe's case, she talked about how she has struggled coming out as a transwoman and working on her social identity publicly. This has been further exacerbated by the rise in gender critical views and debates around transgender rights at the political level. She explained:

“Within the last year the amount of transphobia and anti-trans policies in the news and politics has been very difficult and upsetting. [...] It has affected how I go outside, whether or not I dress or don't dress in a certain way, what shoes I

need to wear, whether or not I need to run or kick someone. [...] I think it's been more difficult since lockdown ended, because expectations to go outside and socialise are starting to increase. So I've gone from being apologetically myself at home to thinking, Oh, I'm about to go outside into public now, how am I going to present myself while still being myself, but not drawing attention or harassment". (30, transwoman, pansexual, interview 1)

While Chloe made the most of the lockdowns and the separation this afforded her from broader cisnormative structures, she was primarily focused on developing her personal and social identity in private. Although the lockdowns were a fateful moment for her in discovering new aspects of herself, she now faces a challenging crossroad in re-entering society with this newly discovered identity. As the above quote indicates, Chloe feels most comfortable and confident in her gender expression within her home environment, where she is supported and encouraged by her wife and can consistently express her gender in the way she wants. However, working on developing her personal and social identity publicly, she is experiencing doubts as to whether she will pass as her gender to others. Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull's (2019) argument that coming out as transgender is an ongoing and socially situated process is relevant to Chloe's case. Her primary concern about coming out publicly has become her safety, leading her to consider whether she needs to alter her gender expression, potentially compromising her authentic self and confidence. This tension between the private and public performing of gender has prompted Chloe to adopt a strategy of avoidance. She has avoided going out into the public, re-engaging with communities and friendships, which has increased her feelings of isolation in a post-pandemic society. Clarke and Carter (2023) suggest that individuals may need more support in reconnecting with communities and re-establishing affected connections. This research has identified one of the ongoing struggles faced by transgender individuals.

Furthermore, with waiting times for NHS Gender Identity Clinic's increasing, throughout data collection some participants made the decision to pursue

private medical transitions, and/or eventually deciding to DIY their hormones<sup>5</sup>. As argued in Chapter 5, there is a two-way relationship between thriving in identity and other adult identities. As such, opting for private services or DIY hormone treatments has only been feasible for participants with the financial means to support these choices. Both Jesse (23, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) and Aspen (20, non-binary, bisexual, interview 1) talked about how they would consider pursuing private medical transitions to avoid the long NHS waiting lists; however, their unemployment makes this option unfeasible. Jesse, whose employment was impacted by the pandemic, explained:

“I don’t have the money, and that’s I think the biggest struggle for a lot of trans people. I don’t have enough money coming in to be able to justify the out of pocket costs. It is to not go through the NHS and get hormone replacement therapy in any capacity”.

With some participants deciding to go private with their medical transitions, they discussed that they have done this to bypass the NHS waiting lists. This was with the hope that they will be able to consistently receive hormones when they want to and from a safe prescriber, and to receive the same quality of healthcare that they would from the NHS. Thus, participants have remained committed to how they want to experience their medical transitions, and they still want to maintain a relational level of engagement with medical professionals. However, some participants talked about how this has created additional financial pressure to afford their healthcare and cover everyday expenses. For instance, both Abbie (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 2) and Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1) opted to pursue private medical transitions after missing their initial NHS referral appointments with the doctor. As students facing increasing living costs, they both decided to DIY their hormones after a few months of going private.

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<sup>5</sup> Do it yourself (DIY) medical transitions means going online and purchasing hormones, working out what hormones to purchase and how much to purchase, and self-administering the medication.

As discussed in Chapter 5, consistency is essential for medical transitions. However, participants talked about how choosing to DIY hormones has hindered this consistency, placing the burden entirely on them to research which hormones to take, their embodied effects, safe sources for obtaining them, and how to administer injections themselves. Thus, with the pandemic exacerbating NHS GIC waiting times, some participants have had to rework their adult narratives to focus on self-managing the burden of their medical transitions. The only medical relational involvement they have is getting blood tests from their GP, however participants must arrange those appointments themselves. For instance, Fi (22, transwoman, lesbian, interview 1) talked about how she “had to swap medications around quite a few times and try different things, just to get my dosages in a good place”. Similarly, Abbie described the laborious process of working out how to DIY her hormones:

“So the first DIY order I did, I bought the identical prescription I had from the private provider. It was finding where to buy it from that I felt I needed to do a lot of research. I then also started looking into monotherapy which is where you just buy the oestrogen, and you just inject it into your blood. But that meant a change in dosages, and you have got to know how to do that safely, where to buy needles from. You’re by-passing all your body’s safety systems as well, that was a bit more nerve wracking, and it took a lot of research. I think it was 2-3 days it took me to get what monotherapy is, this is where you can inject it so you can do it safely. I’m also trying to find dosing levels that I’m happy with. [...] The research was actually one of the bigger pains, finding information is a bit of a nightmare and you can find a lot of information. It was very much like what the research was for my dissertation last year, you find information, you get to their citations and their citations until you’re satisfied that enough people have agreed on this thing and you’re okay with how things work”. (22, transwoman, bisexual, interview 2)

Abbie likened the laborious research she has had to do for her medical transitions to her dissertation. This comparison suggests that the skills she has developed from university have provided her with a level of cultural competency and capital, allowing her to confidently self-navigate this process and invest in her medical transitions (Henderson et al., 2007). She also talked about how she

has shared the document she has created with her wide network of transgender friends, some of whom are not at university, who feel less confident in researching DIY medical transitions. This further suggests that strong research skills facilitate a smoother process for navigating these medical transitions. As such, the pandemic and the exacerbation of NHS GIC waiting lists can be understood as a 'fatalistic' moment (Thomson et al., 2002), where the worsening of experiences was beyond individual control. The response to this moment has been influenced by the wider resources that individuals have been able to access. With Abbie having some level of financial independence and cultural capital, she was able to initially choose private care and later fund her own hormones. Whereas for Jesse, who had restricted financial independence, going private was not an option they could pursue. This finding is also significant when considering neoliberalism and its emphasis on the 'entrepreneurial self' (France, 2016; Kelly, 2006). As the state's responsibility to provide a national healthcare system for transgender individuals has been further eroded due to the pandemic, some participants have decided to take individual responsibility for their own healthcare. Thus, some participants have been forced into being active subjects due their needs not being met by the state (France, 2016). This finding needs to be understood as a double-edged inequality: participants' needs remain unmet by the state, and addressing this situation requires both financial and cultural resources.

Throughout data collection, Abbie (22, transwoman, bisexual) mentioned that she is still on the NHS GIC waiting list while DIYing her hormones, as receiving voice therapy is essential for developing confidence in her sense of passing. However, by the final interview, she had not made any progress on the waiting list and felt less hopeful about being able to voice train. She expressed, "transitions wise, I've sort of given up on voice training for now". By this point, she had also finished university, thus she was approaching the next stage of finding employment feeling less confident in her identity due to the lack of progress with voice therapy. Throughout data collection, Abbie's process of developing

embodied confidence has been unbalanced, which continues to impact her sense of self.

### 8.3 Kate – The ongoing navigation of private vs. public expression of gender

Kate consistently engaged with her scrapbook, adopting a varied approach that included photos of herself, drawings, and scraps from significant moments in her life. Each time we met, she mentioned how useful she found doing the reflections for engaging with her feelings about her gender identity, and to have a record to retrospectively remind herself how far she had come with developing confidence in her transgender identity. Nearly all of Kate's scrapbook entries centred around the biographical field of 'identity', indicating to me how significant the impact of the pandemic was on her sense of self and how this was still continuing to impact her. Throughout the scrapbook, she visually captured the nuances of both private and public expressions of her gender identity, and the movement between developing a personal and social identity. When discussing her scrapbook entries in the interviews, her narrative centred around the 'pressure of passing'.

Kate is a transwoman and pansexual. When I met her for the first time, she was 28 years old, and had only recently come out as transgender. Before the pandemic, Kate had a very traditional and religious upbringing, which influenced the adulthood trajectory she had followed so far, the biographical fields she was socially located in, and the wider culture that surrounded her. She mentioned that she was raised in a religious family and became deeply involved with religion and her local church as a teenager, which remained a significant part of her life until the onset of the pandemic. In terms of her trajectory into adulthood, Kate had already earned a bachelor's degree in theology, held a job related to her church, moved out of her family home to live in a major UK city, and was married to her now ex-wife. Thus, she had achieved the majority of the 'big 5' markers of

adulthood, with her religious background influencing this trajectory. However, in the first interview, she expressed that, despite following this pathway, she did not have a subjective sense of feeling like an adult. She felt there was a missing piece in her adult identity, but she was unsure what it was.

Kate's account touches upon the complex relationship between the objective and subjective dimensions of developing an adult identity (Coleman, 2011; Heckhausen and Buchmann, 2019), and illustrates how social roles reinforce a young person's identification as an adult (Burke and Stets, 2009). So far in Kate's adulthood trajectory, she had very little involvement in selecting the social roles she wanted to pursue for her adulthood, which can explain this discrepancy.

Kate also reflected on this period of her life as a time when she had a sense of discomfort with her body and around masculinity. However, she neither made the connection, nor was encouraged to explore these feelings of discomfort and her personal sense of gender. She talked about how the wider culture hindered her from doing this:

“I was quite religious when I was a teenager and when I first started going to those churches, which is a big reason why it took me a long time to realise that I was trans. [...] I was feeling quite claustrophobic in terms of I could tell that I was hiding a lot about myself, and that was due to the environment that I was in”.

Just before the pandemic, Kate mentioned that she began to emotionally detach from her religious identity, pushing herself away from the increasingly claustrophobic environment she found herself in. This shift influenced her decision to quit her job with the church and she started to work in a completely different, non-religious sector. To facilitate this career change, she enrolled in a postgraduate master's degree. Moving away from religion marked a critical moment for her, providing the separation she needed from that wider culture and allowing her to enter a new phase of “slowly discovering myself”.

When the pandemic hit and the first lockdown began, Kate described it as a time when her feelings about her gender started to “ramp up”. Before the pandemic, while she was starting to discover herself, this was at a very slow pace. She

shared that part of her was still trying to hide herself away from these feelings and keeping herself busy was her way of distraction. With the first lockdown, and the sudden change in her life schedule, she said:

“It gave me a bit more time to be forced with my thoughts a bit. But like the pandemic was obviously a huge moment where my life was suddenly quiet. So I think it did speed up my internal figuring myself out a bit”.

The first lockdown was a time when she started to explore these feelings, researching what it means to be transgender and how it relates to her own gender identity. Consequently, during this time she started to develop a personal and private transgender identity, keeping her thoughts to herself. Throughout the rest of the pandemic, she continued to explore these feelings, but this started to have a significant negative impact on her sense of self. Kate talked about how she approached online communities as a means of understanding experiences of other transwomen and how they had approached discovering and working on their identity. Under normal circumstances, Kate talked about how she would have approached in-person communities to help with this. However, the pandemic curtailed all such opportunities, leading her to turn to online social media instead. She explained how by going online, she encountered discriminatory views towards transwomen, which began to impact her sense of self and her perception of how others would view her. Kate also talked about how she tried to start working on developing a social identity, with her wife being the first person she came out to as transgender during the pandemic. She regarded her wife as the only person she felt comfortable sharing this information with, as she was still privately grappling with her understanding of her gender and did not feel ready to come out to other friends and family. She reflected on the risk she was taking by revealing her feelings, acknowledging that it could potentially impact their relationship. However, she viewed her wife as a crucial source of support and guidance. She felt that because they had previously managed personal challenges together, this would be another challenge they could get through. But, coming out as transgender to her wife altered their relationship dynamics, resulting in her wife struggling with this new information. As a result,

Kate limited how much she expressed her feelings regarding her gender and did not focus on her gendered expressions during the pandemic, prioritising her marriage and her wife's feelings instead.

The pandemic can be considered as a significant critical moment in terms of how Kate discovered new information about her gender identity. However, the process of developing both a personal and social identity was complicated by the resources available to her during this time, which began to affect her sense of self. At the time of our first interview, Kate's self-confidence was still notably hampered. She expressed that she did not feel comfortable or confident enough to work on her gendered expressions, and still had doubts as to whether she would be perceived as a woman by others. Consequently, she remained in a space of having only developed a private, internal understanding of her gender identity. She explained:

“Now that I'm trying to break out of certain mindsets I know that a lot of the ways that I struggle to see myself was influenced by the pandemic. [...] I want to see myself as a woman, and I think the pandemic has made it a lot trickier”.

In the first interview, Kate also talked about how coming out as transgender had affected her sense of adulthood. She explained how discovering this new information about herself made her realise why she had this sense of difference throughout her adulthood trajectories, with new questions starting to emerge on what adulthood means to her. Therefore, through making these connections Kate felt that working on her gender transitions and establishing a coherent and stable social identity could result in a positive shift in her sense of adulthood. On her reflections for how she would like her youth transitions to go in the next 12 months, she emphasised the importance of getting to a place where she felt confident and comfortable in her gender expressions and feeling confident that she would pass as a woman to others. Therefore, at this point Kate's narrative of her adult identity was starting to shift, with her gender identity becoming a symbolic meaning to her sense of self (Jackson, 1995). Drawing on Plummer's (2005) work on Telling sexual stories, Kate was now using her gender identity to

give sense to herself and her future, and the pressure was on passing and to have a sense of stability.

By the time of the second interview, the balance between Kate's private and public expressions of her gender remained uneven. However, while she had not made much progress on her social transitions at the time of the first interview, she had recently begun to feel comfortable exploring her gendered expressions by the second interview. This exploration was still at a private level and confined to her home environment, indicating that she was grappling with her lack of confidence. In between the time of us meeting for the first and second interview, Kate's scrapbook entries acted as case studies for her to reflect on these feelings during the interview.

Shortly after our first interview, Kate included a scrapbook entry about her holiday to Asia with her wife. She expressed excitement about the holiday, seeing it as a first opportunity to explore her gender expression in a new environment and to see how others would refer to her. However, past experiences of the pandemic were still hindering her in this process (Fisher, 2012 in McPherson, 2024). She talked about how because she had not done much on her gendered expressions prior to this trip, she was still suffering from anxiety in relation to the pressure of passing as a woman. Consequently, this lack of confidence meant that she presented her gender as ambiguous, at the expense of her own confidence. She explained:

“I remember going on this trip. I remember it feeling that I can really start doing stuff transition wise. [...] I remember starting the trip feeling quite good about myself, and I remember not feeling as good about myself by the end of it just because of this very persistent unsureness about what to do in public spaces and how people were perceiving me and stuff. [...] It made me realise this is what I want to do, these are the things that I want to do”.

This trip prompted Kate to recognise the importance of working on her gender expression to build the confidence necessary for engaging with others publicly. Returning from this trip, she started to experiment with how she expressed her gender while in her home environment. Thus, Kate included scrapbook entries on

her experimenting with different make up techniques, working out how to become proficient in eyeliner, as well as trying on some wigs she had purchased from online. She took pictures of herself wearing them at home. However, this experimentation added pressure to her relationship with her wife, resulting in their relationship breaking down. This had a negative impact on Kate's sense of self, with her discussing that the guilt this left her with made her feel less inclined to work on her gender expressions and she pushed her needs to one side. She discussed:

“One of the big things that I struggled with was feeling guilt and feeling I deserved bad things, shame and stuff. I think that because I felt responsible for mine and my wife's relationship ending, I think I just accepted it as what I deserved really and I didn't really think about what I wanted that much”.

After their relationship broke down, Kate moved out and into a flat shared with other LGBT+ people. She purposefully made the decision to search for flats that were exclusively LGBT+ in her area, as she felt this would be an important social environment that would help her develop a positive sense of self and comfort. She talked about how moving into a completely different environment with other supportive people, along with confiding in a close friend, helped her to reach a point where she felt confident enough to start working on her gendered expressions in her home environment. In her scrapbook, she included a drawing that reflected the transformation in her self-perception:



**Figure 11: Kate's scrapbook entry reflecting on how her self-perception is developing in a positive direction.**

“This has been so nice where I would be having these nice times and seeing myself exactly how I wanted to. Sometimes I would have moments where it would be awful, but I drew this just because those feelings did naturally go away the more I was able to love myself”.

By the time of the second interview, Kate continued to navigate the complex relationship between developing a personal and social identity that had emerged during the pandemic. There was still this narrative of self-consciousness around expressing her gender at a public level, largely due to limited opportunities for exploration and growth. Kate’s expression of her gender remained private, and in public, she continued to dress ambiguously, reflecting her ongoing struggle to fully embrace her identity. Consequently, her narrative around adulthood

remained unchanged since the first interview, characterised by a lack of consistency and stability in her journey.

By the third interview, the balance between the private and public doing of Kate's gender had shifted substantially. She reflected on how moving into a flat with other LGBT+ people had been significant for developing confidence in herself. She talked about how she has been able to work on her gendered expressions and develop a social identity, using her flatmates and close friend as important social resources for getting advice and feedback. This support has helped her build a sense of confidence and assertiveness in presenting as a woman in public. As a result, Kate has felt more confident going out in public and expressing her gender in the way she wants to. A notable change could be seen in Kate's narrative and scrapbook entries, with her entries being of her taking photos of herself while out in public:



**Figure 12: Kate's scrapbook entry featuring a photo she took of herself in the mirror, accompanied by Kylie Minogue's lyrics: 'Padam Padam, I know you want to take me home'.**

“I’ve noticed this a lot moving into the flat that I’ve moved into. I have three queer flatmates and feel crazy safe. It’s really helping me stop worrying about how people are seeing me. I think my thought processes will be even kinder towards me and I think the change will be exponential. [...] I know that people are going to read me as a woman. Sometimes if I need a little confidence boost I can just go walk around for a bit and watch people’s reactions to me and feel how different they are to what they were before”.

Thus, going for a walk to see people’s reaction to her and feel affirmed in her gender represents a stark contrast to her previous experience of dressing ambiguously and working privately on her gendered expressions. Kate also talked

about how this growth in her confidence has resulted in her seeing a change in how she engages with other biographical fields, stating, “I just feel I’m having so much fun with my life, I’m able to do that now”. She talked about how she has dedicated more time to engaging with in-person LGBT+ communities and close friendships, as overtime she has realised these are significant social and cultural resources that have a positive impact on herself. She also talked about how her approach to employment has changed with her taking up new opportunities to help with her career, opportunities that she would not have considered beforehand with this lack of confidence in herself.

With this newfound confidence, Kate talked about how she felt ready to re-engage with intimacy and explore her sexuality. She shared:

“I feel like I am a lesbian but the other part of me reaches to describe myself as bi or pansexual. It’s mainly just a part of me that’s interested in experimentation with men”.

However, she discussed that re-engaging with intimacy has brought additional challenges concerning her sexed body and how it would be perceived by intimate partners. Reflecting on her past, she discussed how her relationship with her ex-wife changed during the pandemic after coming out as a transwoman, noting that all intimacy with her partner had gone. Thus, the critical moment of the pandemic continued to be revisited in Kate’s account, particularly regarding her self-consciousness about whether others would find her body attractive. She recounted a moment when she met someone on a night out and expressed her nervousness about how they might perceive her:

“In terms of my body, I was really scared of sex at that point, I was terrified of that. The person that I was stuck with that night, I was a bit worried that they would want to have sex, and that I wouldn't really know how to navigate saying no. I was like, shit! What have I got myself into?”

The pandemic and associated lockdowns were clearly a significant period for Kate regarding how it changed the social contexts she was in and resulting in significant discoveries about herself and her adult identity. However, acting on

this newfound understanding has proven to be complicated. She has constantly had to navigate hurdles in developing both her personal and social identity, as well as managing her private and public expressions of self. Thus, the pandemic can be placed in between it being a 'fateful' (Giddens, 1991) and 'fatalistic' (Thomson et al., 2002) moment. Kate's narrative about her adult identity began to shift during the pandemic, as her gender identity became the focus, placing her at a crossroads regarding how to act on this newfound understanding of herself. Therefore, she engaged with what Shanahan (2000) described as the active selection of institutional involvements and interpersonal relationships that would align with her goal of developing confidence in her gender identity. However, this selection process was significantly influenced by the pandemic. By selecting online communities and her wife as these resources, it resulted in a misalignment between the social recognition and investment that she needed and what she actually received (Coleman, 2011). By going online, she became exposed to harmful cisnormative structures and how masculinity and femininity are perceived (Butler, 1990, 2006), and this started to negatively impact her sense of whether she would be perceived as a woman. Similarly, by approaching her wife it changed the dynamics of their marriage. The egalitarian relationship that they had established before the pandemic was disrupted when Kate came out to her wife. This led to Kate feeling unable to be honest and open about her gendered feelings, and all intimacy between the two was lost (Weeks et al., 2001). This discontinuation marked a crisis for their marriage. Applying Henderson et al.'s (2007) theorising on competencies and investments, the biographical fields that Kate placed herself in hindered her ability to develop a sense of competency in working on her gender identity. If this happened under normal circumstances, and Kate could have accessed an in-person LGBT+ support group, it may have resulted in a different outcome.

Moreover, throughout the data collection process, the impacts of approaching online communities were starting to lose its hold in terms of how Kate perceived herself. However, by the time of the last interview, there was still this imbalance in Kate's narrative regarding her confidence in her gender identity. Although she

felt assured that she would pass as a transwoman in public, she continued to experience anxiety when it came to intimacy and her sexed body. In Kate's account, she was still revisiting the pandemic and how that changed the dynamics of her marriage and intimacy with her wife, recognising that these changes were hindering her progress in intimate identity development. The theories proposed by Marsden (2024) and Settersten et al. (2023) regarding unlinked lives are relevant here for understanding how changes during the pandemic affected Kate's marriage. The reasons for their separation and the timing of it continues to affect Kate's confidence in her gender identity. In the concluding final interview, Kate reflected on her sense of adulthood, expressing that she is now approaching her adult identity in a way that feels authentic to her, yet acknowledging that complexities remain:

“When I was doing the straight, traditional development thing I had lesser opportunities. I think that's why it took me so long to realise who I was because it was providing a life that I was content with, and Christianity was huge in that because that was the ingredient that stopped me really thinking about myself and my identity. [...] I would say I'm living my life the way I want now. I'm looking back at those things and they're lacking so much depth, how could I not see that before? I still feel like my sense of adulthood is still a messy question for me to try and answer, because in terms of feelings and stuff I feel there is still stuff that I need to engage with more. Perhaps there is a bit of a delayed adulthood there”.

## 8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that participants had very clear differences in terms of how their gender identity was impacted by the pandemic. Some took it up as an opportunity to learn more about themselves, while other took a break from the everyday stresses of monitoring their gender identity. In contrast, some participants experienced interruptions in their social and medical transitions. These differences stem from what happened to participants at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural level. Coming into a post-pandemic society,

participants now face pressures related to how they express their gender, their comfort with these expressions and their bodies, and their confidence in passing as their identified gender. This pressure can be seen to coincide with relational and cisnormative structural factors, echoing Butler's (1990, 2006) argument that individuals are expected to conform to societal expectations on how to express and perform their gender, which is often monitored and policed by others. Therefore, the historical effects of the pandemic can be traced in the lives of the participants, demonstrating how it provided the social conditions and constraints that influenced their trajectories (Elder, 1975).

# Chapter 9 – Conclusion

## 9.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I present an original investigation into LGBT+ young people's transitions to adulthood in a post-pandemic society. In doing so, this research adds an original contribution to knowledge to the following three interconnected elements of youth transitions, contextualising them through a post-pandemic lens:

1. LGBT+ young people are now faced with making decisions on how they want their adulthoods to look like, and they now play a big part in imagining their futures. This research demonstrates how LGBT+ young people are actively constructing their adult identities by determining the social roles they want to pursue and developing narratives that makes sense of their lives, who they are, how they want others to see them, and aspirations for the future. This research also advances the understanding of how wider cis-heteronormative structures interact with the development of LGBT+ adult identities.
2. This research contributes to the understanding of how developing LGBT+ adult identities involve the interplay between biographical fields, critical moments, and linked lives. It highlights how the accessibility, affirmation, and investment in LGBT+ adult identities are significantly influenced by the social, cultural, and economic resources available within these biographical fields. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how critical moments resulting from the pandemic have shaped individuals' social locations within respective biographical fields, thereby affecting their adult identity development.
3. This research also offers a nuanced understanding of how LGBT+ young people's lives continue to be shaped by the pandemic, making their youth transitions more complex and non-linear.

This PhD research has made a significant contribution to the literature base by employing three novel approaches. Firstly, it addresses a current gap in the literature by exploring how LGBT+ young people navigate the construction of adult identities. Through addressing this first aim, I was able to focus at an individual level on how (if at all) adult identities have been invested in and/or reworked throughout data collection, considering what impact the pandemic has had on this process. Secondly, the research utilises the theoretical concepts of 'biographical field' (Henderson et al., 2007) and 'critical moments' (Giddens, 1991; Thomson et al., 2002). This was to understand how the two and a half years of living through the pandemic (2020-22) impacted the fields most significant to the development of adult identities. This study also investigates how the pandemic influenced responses to critical moments at a level of detail unmatched by other studies. Finally, to understand the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on youth transitions, I conducted a qualitative longitudinal study that followed 8 LGBT+ young people (aged 18-30) across 12 months. 12 participants engaged in a first interview with me. However, I was unable to schedule a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> interview with 4 of the participants, meaning 8 participants engaged with the latter two phases of the longitudinal interviews. This approach centred around a series of repeat biographical interviews and the use of scrapbooks, enabling participants to reflect on their experiences of youth transitions. Adopting this methodology allowed for a retrospective and prospective lens to be embedded throughout by understanding how participants envisioned getting to their self-defined adult identities and the opportunities, changes, continuities they wanted to see to support their youth transitions across data collection. This research explored what actually happened over the course of data collection, how that was the result of the pandemic, and what this meant for the investment into adult identities. Qualitatively understanding the long-term impacts of the pandemic on LGBT+ young people through a youth transitions lens has, to my knowledge, not yet been subject to academic enquiry. In this regard, due to the research aims and methodological approach adopted for this study, this research has a great deal of empirical value.

In this final *Conclusion* chapter, I will provide a synopsis of the key conclusions made in each chapter and detail the methodological, empirical, and theoretical contributions of this thesis. In view of these insights, I make a number of recommendations for future scholarship to build on and extend the significant findings from this research. Following this, I offer some reflections on the research process, reviewing the ways the project has developed and considering possible limitations to the research presented here.

## 9.2 Key contributions

This section will initially highlight how the methodological approach has allowed for the development of a unique empirical perspective. Following this, it will provide a synopsis of the key findings in relation to the three research questions that underpinned this thesis:

1. How do LGBT+ young people understand their adulthood?
2. How did the two and a half years of the pandemic (2020-22) impact LGBT+ young people?
3. How might the pandemic be continuing to affect the transition to their adult identities?

### 9.2.1 Distinct empirical perspective

Qualitatively exploring the impact of the pandemic on LGBT+ young people and how it continues to affect their lives has been seldom researched. The few studies that do exist exploring youth experiences in a post-pandemic society centre around economic impacts of the pandemic and mental health. However, very little is understood on the long-term impacts for LGBT+ young people. Moreover, understanding the long-term social and cultural impacts of the

pandemic for LGBT+ young people has received little attention, despite being recognised as significant aspects of an LGBT+ young person's life. Undertaking this thesis provided a unique opportunity to address this gap in current research.

Applying a qualitative longitudinal approach, combined with biographical interviews and scrapbooks allowed me to develop a distinct perspective through the research, and has kept the approach grounded with QLR conceptualising of time throughout. Using both biographical interviews and scrapbooks has facilitated a comprehensive investigation into the lives of the participants, what changed and continued across time, and most crucially how LGBT+ young people's investments into adult identities have continued or been re-worked. Using a life grid matrix for each participant has also allowed me to explore the complexities of participants' lives, how biographical fields interact with each other, and how impacts of the pandemic in one field has intertwined with another across time. Thus, it has allowed critical moments and their impacts to become more visible, facilitating the construction of detailed case histories for each participant that explore in-depth the nuance behind their lived experiences. Furthermore, the use of life grid matrices has illuminated how LGBT+ young people did not experience the same critical moments during the pandemic. Consequently, this research resists the tendency to homogenise the experiences and impacts of the pandemic on LGBT+ young people. The cross-sectional, thematic comparison of key themes across participants also allowed a better understanding of the similarities and differences in experiences, allowing the stories of LGBT+ young people to be heard and understood. This original, methodological contribution has enabled a distinct empirical perspective to be developed that has given primacy to the lived experiences of LGBT+ young people through time.

## 9.2.2 Adulthood markers

Chapter 5, *Adulthood markers*, addresses the first research question regarding how LGBT+ young people understand their adulthoods and construct adult identities. This set the context for the rest of data collection to understand what participants wanted to work towards, and to understand how they experienced this process across time. It is perhaps more useful for research studies to focus on one aspect of youth transitions to get a good grasp of youth experiences, and these have most commonly been education to work transitions, the move to independent living, and becoming a first-time parent (Coleman, 2011; Osgood et al., 2005; Pustulka, 2022). However, taking a narrow approach to researching youth transitions risks overlooking the complexity of young people's engagement with diverse social and cultural biographical fields, and how they intertwine with each other. Furthermore, with few studies existing that have explored how LGBT+ young people construct adult identities, it was more necessary to understand what adult identities LGBT+ young people want to work towards. This approach has proven highly beneficial, as participants drew on a range of economic, social, and cultural dimensions for constructing adult identities. Similarly, no single adult identity was the dominant focus for how participants felt the pandemic was continuing to affect their youth transitions. This broader perspective has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of youth transitions perspective, which is reflected throughout the findings chapters.

In this findings chapter, I explored how participants' gender and/or sexual identity influenced their sense of difference in developing an adult identity, and how they approach and construct adult identities. For example, participants drew on the 'big 5' markers of adulthood to talk about what was societally expected of them in their youth transitions, noting how their own positionality relative to these benchmarks instilled a sense of difference. This difference was felt the most in relation to the values they placed on engaging with romantic relationships and family. This finding challenges theoretical arguments made in relation to youth transitions that there has been this move away from what constitutes the 'normal

biography' towards a 'choice biography' whereby young people now have a range of options for how they want to construct adult identities (Arnett, 1997, 2000, 2004). For my participants, these societal expectations continued to function as benchmarks that they were comparing their own lives to. Thus, this finding adds to the call, through a sexual and diverse gender identity lens, that the interaction between agency and structure still needs to be considered for understanding youth transitions (MacDonald et al., 2001). I also revisited literature on sexual and intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2005; Weeks et al., 2001; Donovan et al., 1999) to describe why a narrative of difference persists. This highlighted how choices regarding identity and life paths continue to be political, showing that arguments made at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century remain relevant for understanding LGBT+ youth experiences today. Moreover, this sense of difference and lack of clear cultural guidance led participants to view the development of an adult identity as an ongoing process that can be constantly reworked, depending on what social, material, and cultural resources they have access to. However, participants prioritised reclaiming the uniqueness of their subjectivities and pursuing their self-defined adult identities (Young et al., 2014). This drive for personal agency, in combination with participants' gender and/or sexual identity, influenced the values they placed on adulthood markers. These were identified from the data as: (1) independence, (2) close and supportive connections, (3) access to inclusive communities, and (4) thriving in identity.

In relation to developing independence, this process involves movement across four biographical fields: education, employment, family, and living situation. Specific to education, some participants discussed that entering Higher Education (HE) is an important first step towards experiencing independence. For some, this was crucial as it provided the first opportunity to explore and work on their gender and/or sexual identity. Similarly, it was perceived as an important biographical field to help facilitate the development of a career and to develop financial independence. Participants' narrative centred around Henderson et al.'s (2007) theory on competency and investment, seeing HE as a field they would be competent at to invest in their financial independence. Employment was

essential for developing financial independence and unlocking further opportunities to move out of the family home. Thus, participants emphasised the importance of having stability with employment, particularly regarding contractual terms and income. For some participants, their gender and/or sexual identity intersected with the values they expressed about working in specific sectors that offered inclusive and safe environments. This finding demonstrated that Bergan-Gander and von Kurthy's (2006) and Cohler and Michaels' (2013) findings that LGBT+ people can be selective with employment is still relevant for today's society. It also demonstrated that there is more nuance to how work values develop for LGBT+ young people, and it is likely to intersect with the process of identity development. Therefore, depending on when an individual starts to develop their identity/s, it might not be during youth transitions that work values start to develop. In relation to independence from the family, I drew on and developed Barras and Jones' (2023) argument, through a youth transitions lens, that parental support over gender and/or sexual identity influences the relationships participants want to have with their families. There was a level of nuance to this, and participants emphasised the importance of having the choice to decide what relationship they want to have with their family. Similarly, for their living situations, participants expressed a range of living options that they considered important for their adulthood, with not one type being dominant. Some wanted to reach the point of home ownership, others wanted to be able to rent somewhere with their partner, and some emphasised the importance of living with a stable group of friends into adulthood. Thus, I argued that future research exploring LGBT+ individuals' living situation should take a comprehensive approach to understanding the diverse household compositions. Specific to close and supportive connections, participants emphasised the importance of being surrounded by a close friendship group into adulthood and having supportive and accepting romantic partner/s. Both friendships and romantic relationships were discussed as equally important for the social support and affirmation they provide, thus challenging arguments made in youth studies that over time friendship connections can drop in quality and more

importance is gradually placed on romantic partners (Woodman, 2012). In relation to friendships, I drew upon Weeks and colleagues' (2001) concepts of 'families of choice' and the 'friendship ethic' to further elaborate on the findings. Participants expressed a desire for reliable and consistent friendship groups as they transition into adulthood, emphasising that this requires ongoing commitment and a willingness to invest in their connections. Furthermore, this narrative of selectivity and quality further demonstrates and addresses the gap in current research that it is during youth transitions that families of choice are worked on and developed. In relation to romantic relationships, there was a clear difference in perspective that participants placed on relationships. Some wanted to engage in polyamory, some valued marriage as a marker of adulthood, whereas others wanted a stable, monogamous relationship but placed no value on marriage. Similar to their views on friendships, participants emphasised the importance of equality and I brought in Weeks et al.'s (2001) concept of 'egalitarian relationship' to expand on what this equality means and looks like for participants.

A key empirical contribution from this chapter is how access to inclusive communities were valued as important adulthood markers and participants want to have an even balance between engagement with exclusive LGBT+ communities and inclusive communities. Specific to LGBT+ communities, the social and cultural resources that participants saw these fields as providing hold important meaning for how they allow access to, and investment in, adult identities. I used Westrate et al.'s (2024) argument on the egalitarian generational structure, which emphasises the value of interacting with individuals across various ages and identities. This interaction is significant for participants as it provides real-life representations of LGBT+ adult identities, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways adult identities can be constructed and experienced within the community. Additionally, LGBT+ communities were valued to escape from wider cis-heteronormative structures, and to receive affirmation over the adult identities they are investing in. Here, I brought in Halberstam's (2003, 2005) theory on queer subculture to expand on

how the queer use of time and space intertwines with youth transitions. I also challenged Krzaklewska and Cuzzocrea's (2024) concept of 'oasis of youth' that treats engagement in culture and leisure (being youth) and youth transitions (becoming adult) as two separate and distinct processes. I offered an alternative argument that engagement in culture does interact with the process of becoming. Specific to non-LGBT+ communities, engagement takes on different dimensions and I put forward the argument that youth studies should develop a broadened understanding of how young people engage in leisure beyond the night-time economy. Participants emphasised the importance of the activities they engage in being inclusive and accepting of their gender and/or sexual identity, and I offered a link between this and post-subcultural theory (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). This chapter made an important contribution in relation to post-subcultural theory, demonstrating that it can also be a useful theory for understanding youth transitions.

The final marker of adulthood identified is thriving in identity, which is specifically about participants' gender and/or sexual identity. This involves two processes: (1) how thriving is worked towards, and (2) what it feels like. Both these processes involve dimensions at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural level. In this section, I engaged with D'Augelli's (1994) life span model and Butler's (1990, 2006) theory on the social constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality to expand on how participants develop a confident sense of self. This section made two key theoretical contributions. Firstly, it challenged Cohler and Michaels (2013) and Savin-Williams (2005) argument that sexual identity has lost its significance as the master narrative for lesbian and gay young people. Participants drew on their gender and/or sexual identity for discussing what adulthood means to them, placing it as a significant feature to their adult identity. Secondly, I emphasised the two-way relationship between thriving in identity and the other adult identities identified in this chapter. Here, I emphasised how thriving in identity is important for developing a sense of competency for how other adult identities are approached, such as education, employment, and relationships. The main contribution to this finding is that it theoretically expands on Henderson et al.'s

(2007) work on competencies and investments through a sexual and diverse gender identity lens. I also argued that independence, access to inclusive communities, and close and supportive connections are important for developing a confident sense of self. Thus, it challenged Press and Lewis' (2024) argument that having a stable and confident gender and/or sexual identity prior to youth transitions is important, demonstrating that this process is worked on alongside other youth transitions.

### 9.2.3 The critical moment(s) of lockdown(s)

In Chapter 6, I considered the link between how the pandemic continues to impact participants' education, employment, and living situation, and how that is affecting the process to 'Independence'. This chapter has made several significant empirical contributions. In relation to employment, I demonstrated how participants, who would on the surface be deemed as being placed in an advantageous economic position, are also experiencing negative economic impacts. Moreover, I considered the ongoing domino effect of becoming independent. In this respect, I considered the interplay between the biographical fields of education, employment, and living situation and how impacts of the pandemic continue to be revisited in terms of how participants are approaching new biographical fields on the process to independence.

Throughout this chapter, I have engaged with the concept critical moments (Giddens, 1991; Thomson et al., 2002) and the concept turning point (Denzin, 1989; Holland and Thomson, 2009) to consider how the critical moment(s) of the lockdown(s) continue to be revisited, worked, and reworked in a post-pandemic society.

Starting off with education, I explored how the initial move to online learning and the disparity between how it was responded to at a relational and institutional level affected participants' experiences, and enjoyment, of education. I applied Erikson and colleagues (2024) advice throughout, considering how wider

resources available to participants influenced how they adapted to online learning. A key empirical contribution to this finding is that I explored how participants' meaning structures to education have been altered. By bringing in Abbie's case history, I demonstrated how this alteration continues to impact her approach to education and learning in a post-pandemic society. This finding offers an alternative, subjective perspective to the prediction that ongoing impacts of the pandemic will objectively centre around educational outcomes and qualifications (MacDonald et al., 2023; The British Academy, 2021; Roberts, 2022).

In relation to employment, I considered the difference between participants who left education at the compulsory leaving age and those who have completed or are still completing post-compulsory education. This analysis explored the structural differences in how this biographical field has been impacted by the pandemic. Here, I focused on Fi's and Aspen's case histories, whose experiences represent the structural differences identified in the data. I argued that despite differences in impacts and responses, participants are experiencing similar ongoing impacts of uncertainty, instability, and this is affecting their mental health and sense of progression to financial independence. This finding adds complexity to predictions in current literature that there will be structural differences in terms of how young people continue to be economically impacted (Cook et al., 2024).

Finally, in relation to living situation I explored how the pandemic altered participants' living environment. While focusing on how some participants found themselves living with unsupportive parents, I also provided an insight into how living with friends became more stressful. Additionally, some participants became financially stuck in their current living situation based on how their employment was impacted. These two findings offer novel insights to what was already known in the literature that has largely focused on how LGBT+ young people found themselves living in unsupportive environments during the pandemic (Clarke and Carter, 2023; Grant et al., 2021). I also expand on how living in an unsupportive environment has resulted in more importance being

placed on independent living, and how this has intertwined with other biographical fields. In this respect, I brought in Ollie's case history to explore how this newfound importance on maintaining independent living has resulted in compromises being made in relation to career plans.

#### 9.2.4 (Re) Appreciation for friendship and community

Chapter 7, *(Re) Appreciation for friendship and community*, considered how the pandemic continues to impact both adulthood markers 'Close and supportive networks' (more specifically friendships) and 'Engagement with inclusive communities'. This chapter has made significant empirical contributions by focusing on how participants have navigated the social and cultural dimensions of their lives in a post-pandemic society. A key empirical finding from this chapter is that for the majority of participants in this study, the pandemic and the imbued isolation resulted in a re-realisation of the importance of friendships and inclusive communities. Thus, participants have set new priorities for how they wanted to re-engage with these two biographical fields in a post-pandemic society. A significant contribution from this chapter is that it further challenges Woodman's (2012) argument that friendships gradually lose quality in connection as youth transitions progress. This research has been able to take a longitudinal lens to these findings, and explore what opportunities and constraints they have encountered in this process. As such, this chapter has provided valuable insights into how LGBT+ young people have approached re-engaging with communities and friendships in the aftermath of the pandemic, addressing a significant gap in current understanding.

In relation to friendships, participants had a mixture of experiences for how they were impacted by the pandemic. Some used it as an opportunity to make new connections or reconnect with old friends. In contrast, some became more distant with their friends or cut off connections completely; some felt they missed out on opportunities to develop meaningful connections; and others

became more emotionally dependent on their friends. Despite differences in experiences, what was apparent in participants' narrative was that they wanted to continue working on friendship connections in a post-pandemic society. In this regard, participants were placing more emphasis on working on the 'friendship ethic' (Weeks et al., 2001). Participants were also working on different aspects of this, depending on how friendship connections were impacted by the pandemic. Some were actively dedicating more time for their friends, some were being more selective over who they developed friendships with, and others were working on being more open with their friends.

In relation to community, I expanded on Woodrow and Moore's (2021) argument through a longitudinal lens that some young people were better placed than others to navigate the loss of community and I demonstrated the complex nuances in this for LGBT+ young people. With the pandemic curtailing opportunities to engage with physical communities, participants discussed that this resulted in a sense of isolation from having their lifestyles significantly altered. For participants who lived in a rural location, this further reinforced this sense of isolation. Moreover, the pandemic coincided with cultural rites of passage for some participants, resulting in a sense of missing out on important youth leisure opportunities. Thus, coming into a post-pandemic society, participants placed more priority on having an even balance of engaging with LGBT+ and inclusive communities. However, despite these new priorities there has been an imbalance in what opportunities participants have had to work on this. Some participants talked about how they felt LGBT+ communities have become more homogenous in terms of who now attends those spaces and who have not come back since. Additionally, financial constraints resulting from impacts of the pandemic on employment have further restricted participants' ability to engage with these communities. Consequently, many participants have found themselves spending more time within inclusive communities.

Finally, in this chapter I brought in Aspen's case history to explore how this imbalance in engaging with LGBT+ and inclusive communities has impacted the investment into their adult identity. Here, I brought in Evans' (2002) concept of

bounded agency to expand on how post-pandemic opportunity structures have resulted in a social inequality of aspirations for Aspen. Through this, I also applied a critical approach to current theories on how narratives on adult identities can get re-written towards assimilation and default individualisation, depending on what opportunities and resources young people can access (Evans, 2002; Henderson et al., 2007; Kogler et al., 2024). Consequently, I have argued that inequalities in aspirations for LGBT+ young people might be that a narrative, and coherent sense of self, is not developed through into adulthood.

### 9.2.5 Identity exploration

The final findings chapter in this thesis, Chapter 8, *Identity exploration*, captured the complex nature of working on the adulthood marker ‘Thriving in identity’ in a post-pandemic society. This chapter examined how the pandemic altered participants’ experiences regarding their development of their personal and social identities (D’Augelli, 1994), and their efforts to work on social and/or medical transitions. A salient finding from this thesis is the double-edged inequality faced by participants, as their medical transitions needs have remained unmet by the state due to the pandemic’s impact on the NHS. While access to economic and cultural resources is essential for participants to take responsibility for their medical transitions, not everyone has had equal access to these resources.

Coming into a post-pandemic society, participants’ narratives centred around a ‘pressure to pass’. I drew on Butler’s (1990, 2006) argument on the social construction of gender to make sense of the meanings behind this. There has been a clear difference in terms of how participants have responded to this pressure. For some, the fear that they will not pass as their self-identified gender has resulted in some participants remaining isolated from re-engaging in society, and/or has created an imbalance between the private and public expression of their gender. Moreover, the exacerbated delays in accessing NHS Gender Identity

Clinics have resulted in some participants deciding to go private with their healthcare and/or eventually resorting to DIYing their medical care. I considered how this finding relates to the neoliberal emphasis on the 'entrepreneurial self' as a citizenship responsibility, and how some participants have been pressured into being active subjects and taking responsibility for their own medical care (France, 2016).

Finally, in this chapter I brought in Kate's case history to explore and interrogate the complex, ongoing, and multi-dimensional aspects of the pressure to pass. A key empirical contribution from this chapter lies in the incorporation of Kate's scrapbook entries, which enrich the understanding of the nuanced interplay between her private and public expressions of gender identity. This analysis highlights the dynamic movement between developing a personal identity and navigating social identity. In this regard, a methodological advantage of combining biographical interviews and scrapbooks with a qualitative longitudinal approach is that I was able to capture the pressure of passing from multiple angles, which allowed for the complexity and nuance of this experience to emerge.

### 9.3 Recommendations for future research

There are a number of potentially impactful ways in which the empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis could be developed and extended.

In Chapter 5, this research uncovered that there continues to be a sense of difference in relation to how LGBT+ adult identities are understood and constructed. Future research on this topic that utilise theories on sexual and intimate citizenship, involving a bigger and more representative sample, will be valuable. This is especially so given the central tension behind this difference is a lack of cultural narrative and social representation. It would be fruitful to understand how and where LGBT+ young people would like to see more narratives and representations of LGBT+ adult identities. This line of enquiry

could help answer pertinent questions in this area, such as: What role do institutions (such as education, the media, youth work) have in increasing social representations? What should these social representations look like? How can understandings of citizenship be expanded at a state level to increase access to rights to everyone?

Secondly, as discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to how participants developed specific work values, some of the findings uncovered that participants were making compromises in how they approach their careers in order to find employment in a safe and inclusive environment. This included applying for younger, less established companies, or going self-employed. Further research should explore if, and how, developing specific work values might impact the development to financial stability for LGBT+ young people. This line of research would be a valuable contribution to youth studies and current understandings of the precarity of the youth labour market. To my knowledge, there is very little to no research exploring the interaction between work values and financial independence among LGBT+ young people.

Further research exploring the ongoing economic impacts of the pandemic for both LGBT+ young people who finished education at the compulsory leaving age, and those who continued with post-compulsory education, would be valuable. This line of research would be a valuable source of information to identify how educational and welfare-based institutions can provide better support to young people approaching employment, especially for those experiencing uncertainty with this next step of economic transitions.

While this research offered useful insights into the ways in which opportunities for engaging with LGBT+ communities have been altered in a post-pandemic society, further research on this topic would be valuable. Given that participants valued the egalitarian generational culture with LGBT+ communities, it would be fruitful to understand if, and why, some people have been more hesitant with their re-engagements. This line of enquiry could help to understand how individuals might need more support re-engaging with communities, where this support could come from, and what it could look like. Such research would serve to

contribute to improving individuals' experiences of LGBT+ communities and working on this highly valued egalitarian generational structure.

In Chapter 7, I developed existing theories regarding inequalities in aspirations during youth transitions (Evans, 2002; Henderson et al., 2007; Kogler et al., 2024). I put forward the argument that inequalities in aspirations for LGBT+ young people might be that a narrative, and coherent sense of self, is not developed through into adulthood. Considering this relationship between social inequalities in aspiration and narrative on a wider sample of LGBT+ young people is an important area for future research. This exploration could theoretically enhance existing frameworks by integrating a sexual and diverse gender identity perspective. Additionally, this argument is grounded in Aspen's case history which is reflective of findings in other studies indicating that the geographic location of a LGBT+ young people can determine access to social and cultural opportunities (Casey, 2004). Therefore, valuable research can be conducted on how rural LGBT+ young people perceive their ability to develop an adult identity and accompanying narrative. Exploring this would provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by rural LGBT+ youth, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between location and identity formation (Wenham, 2019).

In Chapter 8, I talked about the double-edged inequality transgender participants are now experiencing regarding their medical transitions in a post-pandemic society. However, due to the qualitative nature of this research and its focus on individual experiences, it was not within the scope of this project to fully capture the potential scale and complexity of the social inequalities arising from the pandemic's impact on medical transitions. Future research should take a more targeted approach to understanding how, if at all, transgender young people have responded to the delays in their medical transitions. This line of enquiry would be valuable to consider the impact this is having on their sense of self, the relationship they feel they have with the state, and whether this has reinforced a sense of difference. Moreover, it is worth considering whether this has resulted in

a 'passing privilege', what this looks and feels like, and how it is affecting how other adult identities are being approached.

## 9.4 Reflections on the research process

This study has several limitations, which result from resource limitations of this three-year doctorate and the need to narrow the focus of the research in order to address its specific aims within the timeframe. Here, I reflect on these and consider how the research could have been improved and what this means for where future research should be directed.

Firstly, as this was a qualitative longitudinal project the sample size was small, thus there are problems with external validity. This sample size became smaller as some participants dropped out from the study during data collection. The value of this research is in understanding the complexities and nuance of these LGBT+ young people's lives, how biographical fields intertwine with each other, and how adult identities get (re)worked across time. Thus, this was an exploratory project and the primary aim was to qualitatively address the gap in current research, focusing on lived experiences through time. It does not make assumptions about the applicability and generalisability of these experiences to all LGBT+ young people. Had the research recruited a different group of LGBT+ young people with a different mix of demographics, some of the findings may have been different. Adopting a mixed methods approach, and incorporating a cross-sectional design as opposed to just a QLR approach, would have provided further depth and variety to the research data collected, particularly for the first research question. Using one-off, semi-structured interviews and recruiting a larger sample of LGBT+ young people to explore what adulthood means to them would have provided greater opportunity for comparison of responses and allowed firmer conclusions to answer this research question.

A second limitation, and a common pitfall to longitudinal research, is that data collection finished as some participants were approaching new crossroads in their youth transitions, such as finishing education and looking for work, or approaching new intimate encounters with people. On reflection, it would have been insightful to extend the research over a longer period of time to provide a greater and richer depth of the data. This would allow a greater exploration of the critical moments that happened during the lockdown, providing further opportunities to revisit them with the participants and understand how those critical moments continue to shape how new biographical processes are being approached. The success of using scrapbooks and biographical interviews in creating rich narratives points to the fact that employing both these methods would be well suited to exploring ongoing impacts of the pandemic, and would further add to the literature on the use of creative qualitative methods.

Finally, the sample was quite homogenous in that all participants had 'come out' prior to data collection. While some transgender participants were still in the process of developing their identity, influenced by what happened to them during the pandemic, the majority of the sample were out and comfortable with their sexual identity at the start of data collection. This may have influenced how participants narrated the ongoing impacts of the pandemic in relation to the biographical field of identity and developing a confident sense of self. For instance, Chapter 8, *Identity exploration*, focused exclusively on gender identity as the majority of participants who identified as transgender focused on their gender identity more than their sexuality for how it was impacted by the pandemic. Furthermore, for participants who were not transgender, they drew upon other biographical fields as more significant for how the pandemic was continuing to impact them. When discussions around sexuality were prompted, participants felt that nothing significant had happened in relation to developing their sexual identity throughout data collection. In the methodology chapter, I reflect on my approach to recruitment, the problems I encountered, and the sample recruited for this study to consider potential reasons for why this study recruited participants who were 'out' and relatively comfortable with their sexual

identity. Perhaps if this study originally sought out to be a collaborative project with an LGBT+ support organisation or charity, this may have helped recruit participants who were at different stages in developing their sexual identity and may have yielded different results. Future research should therefore consider the potential of collaborating with support organisations to yield a richer data set.

Further to the above, the ethnicity and social class positioning of participants were not collected, as sexuality and gender identity were the primary characteristics considered for analysis. I am particularly conscious that the participants involved in this project were predominantly of White ethnicity. While there were specific reasons for certain demographic information not being collected, it does mean I am unable to make analytical comments or explore the nuances of how social class and ethnicity may have intersected with participants' perceptions of adulthood and their (post-) pandemic experiences.

## 9.5 Final remarks

The research presented in this thesis has a great deal of empirical, methodological, and theoretical value. As has been highlighted in this chapter, this project will act as a jumping off point for future research interested in LGBT+ youth transitions and adult identities, citizenship studies, youth culture, and LGBT+ identity development scholarship. In this regard, this research has explored a highly novel and under-researched topic, which has raised new questions and opportunities for future study. Furthermore, the combination of methodological techniques mobilised in this thesis may be taken up by scholars interested in utilising creative qualitative methods to complement qualitative longitudinal approaches, and to produce a rich insight into individual lives.

# Appendix 1 - Participant information sheet

## Impact of COVID-19 and its ongoing legacy for LGBT+ young people's transition to adulthood.

**Researcher(s):** Stephanie Daw (She/Her)

**Department:** Sociology Department

**Contact details:** [stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor name:** Prof. Catherine Donovan and Dr Hannah King

**Supervisor contact details:** [Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk);  
[Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk)

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University.

This study has received ethical approval from the Sociology department ethics committee of Durham University.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the aims of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully and contact me if there is anything that is not clear.

### What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to research how the pandemic has affected your life, with a primary focus on looking at what the ongoing impacts are for you. I then ultimately want to understand what these impacts mean for you becoming an adult.

### Why have I been invited to take part?

The study is interested in understanding what the ongoing impacts of the pandemic are on your life and how it is affecting you becoming an adult. You have been invited to take part because you may have experience in this area, in that the pandemic is affecting you becoming an adult. Please note that for this study, I am not using a formal definition of what being an adult means. I am more interested looking at whether you feel like an adult, and how the pandemic might still be affecting your path to becoming an adult. Individuals who are aged between 18-30, identify as LGBT+ and feel they have experiences relevant to the aims of this study are welcome to participate.

## **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you will be asked to participate in the study for the next 12 months. You can withdraw from the study at any point, without giving a reason. However, if you do decide to withdraw after the first 7 months of the study you will not be able to withdraw any of your data collected on this project. This is to ensure I have enough data to analyse to write up. The section 'Will my data be kept confidential?' explains how this data will be kept secure. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you is explained further in the attached Privacy Notice.

## **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to:

- Take part in three (approximately 1 hour long) interviews over the course of 12 months. These interviews will be scheduled at 5-6 monthly intervals. The date and time of these interviews will be mutually agreed upon, according to your availability. These interviews will take place at a location that is convenient and safe for you (the researcher will travel) or can take place on Teams or Zoom\*
  - Interviews will be recorded either using a Dictaphone for an in-person interview, or using Teams/Zoom's recording software if done online.
- Create a physical scrapbook or one using Instagram\*\*, offering your personal reflections of how the pandemic might still be affecting your life and becoming an adult. These scrapbook entries will be discussed during the interviews and will not appear in any research outputs (i.e. thesis, publications, blogs) unless you identify any that you are happy to be used. You will be asked to email me photos of your scrapbook entries from each interval 2 weeks before each interview, if you opt to complete a physical scrapbook. I, the researcher, will take screenshots of your Instagram scrapbook posts prior to the interview.
  - You are not pressured to complete your scrapbook everyday, however ideally you should have one entry per month. You should complete your scrapbook in a location that you feel safe and comfortable in. It is up to you how you complete your scrapbook, an accompanying scrapbook guide sheet will be handed to you to give you guidance.
- Follow the Instagram research account. This Instagram account will be linked to this study and managed by the researcher, and it will upload posts every 2-3 weeks that will prompt you to complete the scrapbook.

\* If you opt to do an interview online, it is your responsibility to do it in a location you feel safe in and has internet connection. An example location could be a local

café, booking a private space in the public library or the local community centre. Please also consider using a headset so other people in the same space cannot overhear our conversation.

\*\*A physical scrapbook will be handed to you by the researcher, however you will need to use your personal smartphone to create an Instagram scrapbook account. If you wish to take any photos for your scrapbook but you do not own a device to take photos, one will be loaned to you for the duration of the study.

## **Are there any potential risks involved?**

Talking about the pandemic and sexuality and/or gender is a personal and potentially sensitive topic. As such, your safety and comfort are our primary concern. If there are any topics you find distressing, please inform the researcher of these at the start of the interviews and they will not be discussed. Please note, you can ask to change topic, refuse to answer any questions, or stop the interview at any time. Please also note that you do not have to talk about any topics in your scrapbooks if it puts you at risk, or makes you feel distressed.

The researcher can provide you with information regarding external sources of support upon request, and these will be sent to you with every check-in email.

## **Will my data be kept confidential?**

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential and anonymised. All your data will be assigned a pseudonym straight after the first interview. If the data is published, then it will not include any information (i.e. interview quotes or scrapbook entries) that can be identified back to you. I will ask for you to identify any scrapbook entries that you are happy for me to use in research outputs (e.g. publications, conference papers, research reports). Any entries that you don't want me to use will be used for analysis only and will not be included in any publications. If you identify any pictures that you are happy for me to use, and which include your face on, these will be pixelated before being included in any publications.

You will also be emailed each of your interview transcripts to demonstrate how your data has been anonymised.

All scrapbook excerpts, from email and my phone, will be manually downloaded for analysis. All data (transcripts, scrapbooks, consent forms) will be stored securely as digital files on the researcher's password protected device. Any documents that are printed for the purpose of analysis will be stored in a locked desk drawer and shredded after use. All of the data collected for this project will be deleted 3 years after the completion of the study, September 2027.

## **What will happen to the results of the project?**

The project thesis is likely to be completed by July 2024. Other research outputs such as publications, conference papers, and research reports may be published before this time. Please discuss with the researcher if you would like to have access to any outputs that result from this research.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has created an online collection of all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides free access to the full texts. This study which you are invited to take part in will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be uploaded online and in print to the University collection, for its use in future research. It will be uploaded as open access, therefore available to anyone to look at.

### **Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor (details are at the top of this sheet). If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

# Appendix 2 - Consent form

## Impact of COVID-19 and its ongoing legacy for LGBT+ young people's transition to adulthood

### ***Participant consent form***

**Researcher(s):** Stephanie Daw (She/Her)

**Department:** Sociology Department

**Contact details:** [stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor name:** Prof. Catherine Donovan and Dr Hannah King

**Supervisor contact details:** [Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk);  
[Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk)

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project are, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. There are two separate consent forms: (1) Related to the interviews and scrapbooks, (2) Specifically related to using Instagram for this study. Please read them both and initial each box to indicate your agreement. Only initial the statements in section 2 if it applies to you.

### **Section 1: Interviews and scrapbook consent:**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to personal data, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I consent to being audio recorded for the purpose of transcription.	
I consent that I will complete the scrapbook in a location that I feel safe and comfortable in and I will look after my physical scrapbook.	
I consent to sharing my scrapbook entries with the researcher two weeks prior to each interview.	
I understand that I may be anonymously quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs on the condition that it does not include any identifiable information.	

I consent to scrapbook entries being used in publications, reports, and other research outputs on the condition that I have identified with the researcher which entries I am happy to be used and that my face will be pixelated, if necessary.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary for the course of the next 12 months and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason any time during the study.	
I understand that if I withdraw from the study after the first 7 months of the study, I will not be able to withdraw any of my data related to the study.	
I understand that I can continue creating my scrapbooks after the study has finished, however I do so at my own risk.	
I understand that it is my responsibility to keep the photos I take of my scrapbook entries that I send to the researcher in a secure place.	
I understand that I will be emailed a copy of each of my interview transcripts to show how my data has been anonymised.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	

## Section 2: Instagram consent:

Please read the following information and put your initial next to each statement if it applies to you (i.e. If you are going to create an Instagram scrapbook account and/or follow the corresponding research account)

I consent that if I create an Instagram scrapbook, I should put it on private mode and enable two-factor authentication.	
I consent to only follow and be followed by the corresponding research account on my scrapbook account, and I will not accept any other followers or follow anyone else.	
I consent that I will adjust my cookie and data sharing settings on my scrapbook account so that little data is shared to Instagram.	
I consent that if I receive any malicious content, I will report and block the account I received it from and I will tell the lead researcher (contact details at the top of this form).	
I agree that I will keep the identity of the other Instagram users who are following the research account private, and to not share them with anyone else.	
I understand that the researcher will take screenshots of my Instagram scrapbook posts prior to each interview.	

I consent that I should use the scrapbook Instagram account only for the purpose of this study, and not for personal recreational use.	
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## Appendix 3 - COVID prompt cards

<b>Social distancing restriction</b>		
<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Description</i>
March 2020	Anyone in a household with symptoms to isolate for 14 days.	Stay at home, stop social gatherings.
March 2020	First national lockdown	Social gatherings of six people allowed outside, provided they stay 2m apart.
June 2020	Groups of 6 people maximum to meet outdoors	Support bubbles for single households can join with one other household to make a support bubble.
June 2020	Support bubbles for single households	You can now meet in groups of up to two households (support bubble counts as one) in any location, indoors or outdoors.
July 2020	Relaxing of social gatherings	Wearing a face covering became mandatory for shops and supermarkets
July 2020	Masks to be mandatory	People can only meet with other households, indoors/outdoors, in groups of 6 maximum.
September 2020	Group of 6 restriction	<p>Tier 1 – You can gather in groups of 6 maximum from different households, or your support bubble, indoors/outdoors, maintain social distancing.</p> <p>Tier 2 – You can gather in groups of 6 maximum outdoors only, but you can meet inside with your support bubble.</p>

		Tier 3 – Only spend time with people you live with if you can. You cannot invite people you do not live with unless they are in your support bubble. You can meet with others outdoors, but only in groups of 6.
October 2020	Three-tiered system for local COVID-19 rates	
November 2020	Second national lockdown	
December 2020	Regional tier system brought back into action after 2 <sup>nd</sup> lockdown.	Tier 4 – Stay at home, and only leave your house for essential purposes or meeting up with others in your support bubble. You can only meet with one other person outdoors.
December 2020	Introduction of Tier 4	In England’s tier 4 areas, you can only celebrate Christmas with members of your household/support bubble.  In Tier 1, 2, and 3 – Christmas bubbles of three households coming together only on 25 <sup>th</sup> December.
23 <sup>rd</sup> December to 26 <sup>th</sup> December 2020	Christmas restrictions	
January 2021	Third national lockdown introduced	Outdoor gatherings of 6 people max, or your support bubble will be allowed to meet outside.
March 2021	Group of 6 for social gatherings	Gatherings of 6 people or support bubble can meet inside, ensuring 2m distance is applied.
April 2021	Relaxing of social contact rules	No limits on how many people can meet.
July 2021	Complete relaxing of social contact rules	The rise in Omicron meant the government encouraged people to

		limit social contacts with others, to ensure the spread of COVID did not get too high over Christmas. No social distancing measures were introduced, however.
December 2021	Rise in Omicron variant of COVID	
February 2022	All legal social distancing rules lifted	

<b>Employment</b>	
<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>
February 2020	Everyone told to work from home, if they can.
March 2020	Non-essential retail, entertainment, indoor leisure, hospitality to close until further notice.
March 2020	Introduction of Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough), the government paid 80% of an individual's wage if they could not work from home or their place of work had closed.
July 2020	Non-essential sectors opened to the public.
October 2020	The tier system was introduced, non-essential sectors had to close if their region was placed in Tier 2/3.
September 2020	Furlough reduced to pay 70% of an individual's wage.
October 2020	Furlough reduced to pay 60% of an individual's wage.
November 2020	Non-essential retail closed for the second national lockdown.
December 2020	Non-essential retail opened again.
January 2021	Non-essential retail closed for the third national lockdown.
April-July 2021	Non-essential retail gradually reopens.
September 2021	Furlough ended.
December 2021	Rise in omicron variant.
February 2022	Lifting of all social distancing restrictions.

<b>Sixth form</b>	
<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>
March 2020	Sixth forms to close until further notice, lessons moved online.
June 2020	Sixth forms opened for Year 12 for some face-to-face/hybrid lessons.
June 2020	A-Level exams. Grades based on yearly assessments, mock exam results, and teacher predicted grades.
September 2020	Sixth forms opened for everyone.
January 2021	Sixth forms closed for the third national lockdown.
March 2021	Sixth forms returned to face-to-face teaching.
June 2021	A-Level exams cancelled; grades based on teachers' grades from submitted work.
July 2021	Lifting of most legal limits on social distancing restrictions.
September 2021	Sixth forms open as normal
December 2021	Rise in omicron variant.
February 2022	Lifting of <i>all</i> legal social distancing restrictions.

<b>University</b>	
<i>Date</i>	<i>Policy</i>
March 2020	University campuses told to close, teaching moved online, and students moved home.
September 2020	University teaching returned to face-to-face, but England had a national tier system at the time. Social events remained paused.
January 2021	Universities closed again, teaching returned online, and many decided the rest of the academic year would be online.
March 2021	University teaching returned to face-to-face, however most universities decided the rest of the academic year would remain online.
September 2021	Universities opened again; restrictions placed on social events.
December 2021	Rise in omicron variant.
February 2022	Lifting of all legal social distancing restrictions.

## Appendix 4 - Diachronic matrix table

Biographical field	Pre-pandemic	Pandemic	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	<i>Summary</i>	<i>Summary codes</i>
Education							
Employment							
Family							
Friendships							
Identity							
Lifestyle							
Living situation							
Location							
Mental health							
Relationships							

## Appendix 5 - Synchronic matrix table

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Education					
Employment					
Family					
Friendships					
Identity					
Lifestyle					
Living situation					
Location					
Mental health					
Relationships					

# Appendix 6 - Privacy notice

Durham University's responsibilities under data protection legislation include the duty to ensure that we provide individuals with information about how we process personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. This privacy notice provides a general description of the broad range of processing activity in addition there are tailored privacy notices covering some specific processing activity.

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken.

## **PART 1 – GENERIC PRIVACY NOTICE**

Please access our General Privacy Notice online, here:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/governance/information-governance/data-protection/privacy-notices/generic-privacy-notice/>

## **PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE**

This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide personal data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

### **Project title**

Impact of COVID-19 and its ongoing legacy for LGBT+ young people's transition to adulthood.

### **Types of personal data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection**

\*Please note this information is for both participants who are either doing (1) a one-off interview, or (2) taking part in the longitudinal study\*.

Personal data will be collected through interviews and scrapbooks. This will include data on your age, your sexuality and gender identity, where you live, employment status, your living situation and educational qualifications. It will collect data on your experience of the pandemic, your views on what being an adult means to you, and your experiences of how the pandemic is still affecting you. Photographs, audio or video recordings of yourself may also be collected, depending on if and how you want to complete your scrapbook.

### **Lawful basis**

Under data protection legislation, we need to tell you the lawful basis we are relying on to process your data. The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: The processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research. For further information see:

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/internal/research.innovation/governance/ethics/governance/dp/legalbasis/>

### **How personal data is stored**

All personal data will be held securely on a password protected device and strictly confidential to the research team. You will be allocated a pseudonym for your interview transcript and scrapbooks which will not be connected to your name or identity. Any identifiers that may have been provided will not be included in the write-up of the results, and names will be changed during transcription. Similarly, any street names, venues, or date of events that are mentioned in the interview will be changed. Quotes will also not be used if there is a possibility of identification. You will also be emailed a copy of each of your interview transcript, to demonstrate how your data has been anonymised. Instagram usernames will not be included in data outputs.

All personal data in electronic form will be stored on a password protected device, and any hardcopies will be kept in a locked desk drawer. Data will not be available to anyone outside the research team. Signed consent forms will be stored separately to project data.

Interview conversations will be recorded and stored on a password protected device until it has been transcribed by the researcher. No one else will have access to the recording, and it will be erased once the transcribing has been completed.

If you are using Instagram to create your scrapbook, then there is an extra dimension as to how Instagram will store your personal data that you upload when creating your scrapbook accounts. The type of information Instagram collects depends on how you use their products. Instagram collects data on the content you provide when using their products, such as: the location of a photo or the date it was created, the type of content you view or engage with, the Instagram features you use (i.e. Instagram stories, shopping, etc.), the accounts you interact with, and how much time you spend on the app. As you will only be using the scrapbook account purely for the purpose of this research, and the only account you will be interacting with is the corresponding

research account, this reduces the data the app collects in relation to your content use. The Instagram guide sheet that will be given to you will also tell you how to reduce the data Instagram collects. If you do not feel comfortable using Instagram for creating their scrapbooks, then you will have the option of creating a physical scrapbook as an alternative means.

### **How personal data is processed**

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential and if the data is published, it will not be identifiable as yours. All of your data will be assigned a pseudonym straight after the first interview. I will go through each scrapbook entry with you for you to identify any that you do/do not want including in data outputs (e.g. publications, conference papers, research reports). Any entries that you do not want including will be used for analysis only and will not be included in any publications. Any entries that include your face, and you are happy to be used, will be pixelated prior to including them in data outputs. Interview quotes will also not be included if there is a possibility of identifying you or your family/friends.

All data (transcripts, scrapbooks, consent forms) will be stored securely as digital files on the researcher's password protected device. Any documents that are printed for the purpose of analysis will be stored in a locked drawer and shredded after use. All of the data collected for the study will be deleted 3 years after the completion of the study (Predicted to be September 2027).

The recorded interviews will be transcribed by the researcher, and personal information will be coded and anonymised. The original recording will then be erased. You will be emailed a copy of your transcript to show how your data has been anonymised. It is your responsibility to ensure that these transcripts are held securely on your personal device.

Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

### **Withdrawal of data**

You have the right to withdraw from the project at any point during data collection.

*If you are doing a one-off interview*

If you withdraw from the study after you have completed the interview, you will be asked if you want the researcher to use your transcript for analysis. If you accept, then transcripts will be kept in a safe and secure place, and the consent form will be kept too. If you do not want your data to be analysed, then transcripts, audio recordings, and consent forms will be deleted straight away. There will be no repercussions if you do decide to withdraw.

Please note that while you can withdraw from the study anytime, you will not be able to withdraw any of your data collected for the study at the point of data analysis (which will be December 2023). This is to ensure I have enough data to analyse and write up in a thesis. This data will be kept securely, and will be deleted 3 years after the completion of the study (Predicted to be September 2027).

If you withdraw before you have completed the first interview, then all the data collected up to that point will be deleted instantly.

*If you are doing the longitudinal study*

If you withdraw from the study after you have completed the first interview and started completing your scrapbook, you will be asked if you want the researcher to use your transcript and scrapbooks for analysis. If you accept, then transcripts and scrapbook excerpts will be kept in a safe and secure place, and the consent form will be kept too. The researcher will also ask you if you have any scrapbook excerpts that you have not sent them to send them for analysis, if you are happy to do so. If you do not want your data to be analysed, then transcripts, audio recordings, scrapbook excerpts and consent forms will be deleted straight away. There will be no repercussions if you do decide to withdraw.

Please note that while you can withdraw from the study anytime, you will not be able to withdraw any of your data collected for the study after the first 7 months. This is to ensure I have enough data to analyse and write up in a thesis. This data will be kept securely, and will be deleted 3 years after the completion of the study (Predicted to be September 2027).

If you withdraw before you have completed the first interview, then all the data collected up to that point will be deleted instantly.

**How to object to the processing of your personal data for this project**

If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your personal data, or you wish to withdraw your data from the project, contact: Stephanie Daw (Lead researcher) Email: [stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk)

Catherine Donovan (Researcher supervisor) Email: [Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk)

Hannah King (Researcher supervisor) Email: [Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk)

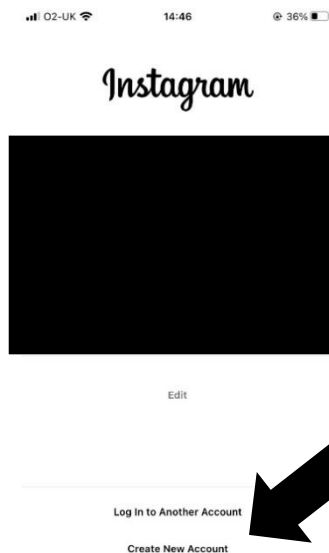
# Appendix 7 - Instagram guide sheet

This guide sheet will show you how to create an Instagram account, how to adjust privacy and cookie settings, how to upload posts, and how to report any hostile comments/messages.

## 1. *Setting up a new Instagram account*

If you do not have the app downloaded, then you will need to download it. Please note: Instagram will only download if you have the software IOS 12.4 or later/Android 2.2. and later.

1a. Once downloaded, tap the Instagram app to open it. This will take you to the sign-in screen > Tap create new account.



Enter your preferred email. Make sure this is a valid, accessible email, since you'll need it to verify your identity if you forget your password. Once filled in tap 'Next'.

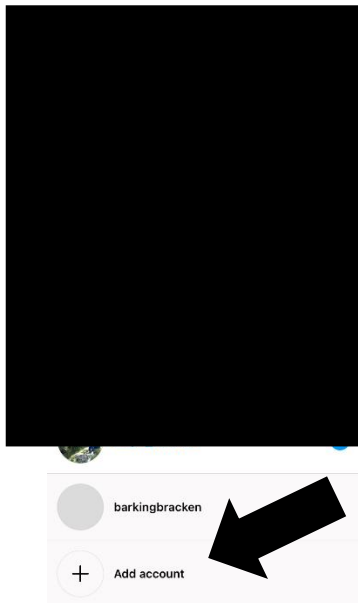
Create a username and password, then tap 'Next'. Your username can be anything, as long as it does not include any identifiable information such as your full name.

From here, you can add your name, profile picture, and a brief description of yourself. For this study, please only include your first name, and do not upload a profile picture or a brief description of yourself where you could be identified by other Instagram users.

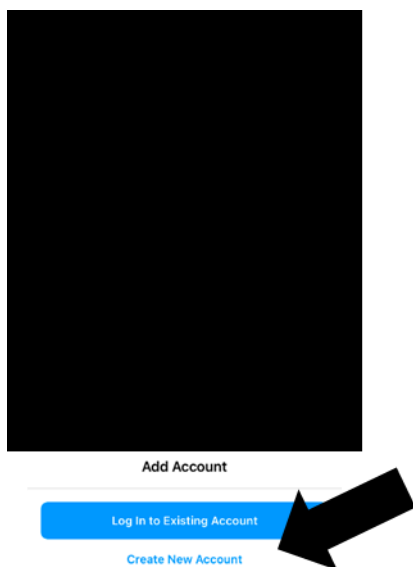
Tap 'done' to complete account creation. You now have an active Instagram account!

## 2. Setting up a new Instagram account that is linked to your current account

2a. Go to your profile and click on your username. This will give you a drop-down menu, at the bottom click on 'add account'



b. Then click 'create new account'



2c. Here, you will be asked to create a new username. Your username can be anything, as long as it does not include any identifiable information such as your full name.

2d. You will then be asked to create a password, make sure it is a secure password.

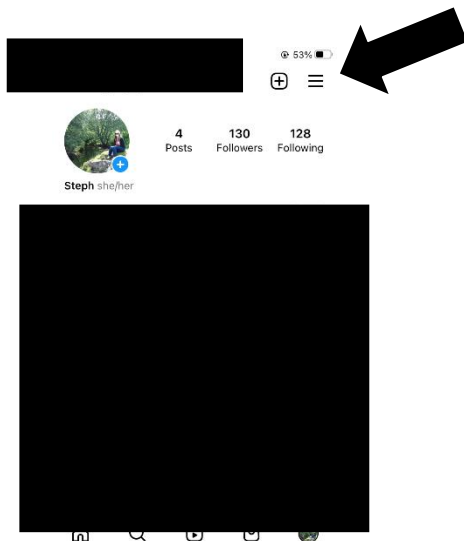
2e. Then press on 'complete sign-up'. Here you will be prompted to find Facebook friends, find contacts, and add a profile photo. Please skip all of those.

You now have another Instagram account linked to your current one!

### 3. How to adjust privacy settings

For this study, I would like your scrapbook accounts to be made private and for you to disable comments.

3a. Click on your profile and the icon in the top right of the screen (three vertical bars).



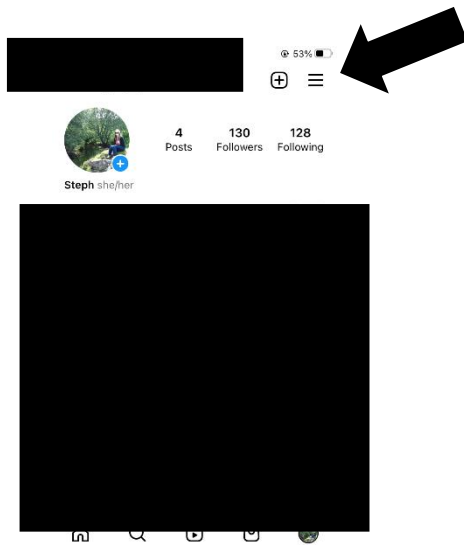
3b. Click on settings > private account > tab the bar for private account

To turn off comments, go to the post you want to disable comments and tap the drop-down menu symbol in the top right corner (three horizontal dots).



3ai. Select 'Turn off commenting'

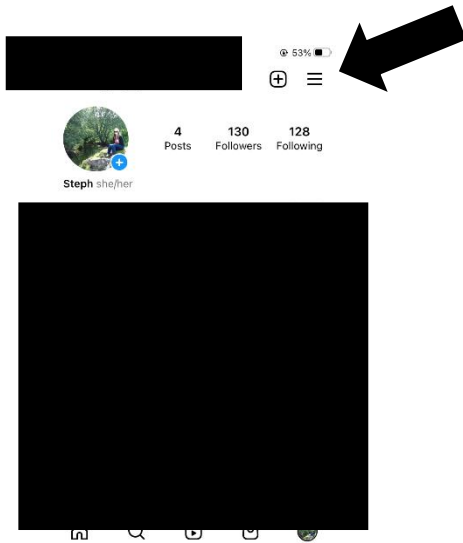
To enable two-factor authentication, go to your profile and click the icon in the top right of the screen (three vertical bars).



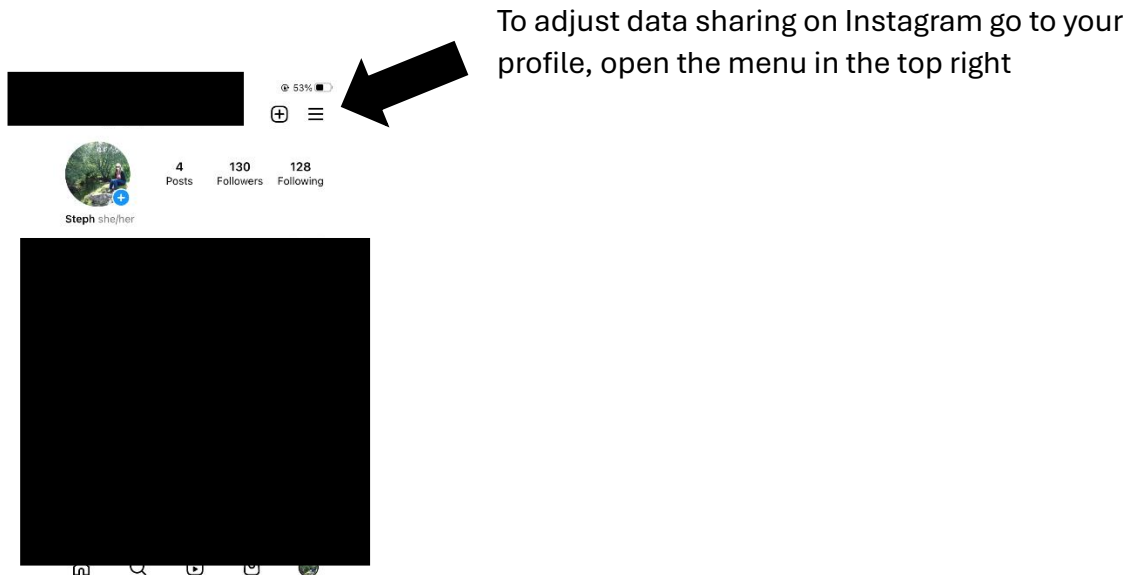
3a.iii. Click on security > Select 'get started' and proceed with the two-factor authentication that is easier for you, i.e. either downloading the authentication app or sending a code to the phone number linked to your account.

#### 4. Adjust data sharing and cookie settings

4a. Click on your profile and the icon in the top right of the screen (three vertical bars).



4b. Click on settings > Click on 'privacy' and scroll to the bottom and click on 'cookies'. Please tap all of the bars to turn off cookie settings.

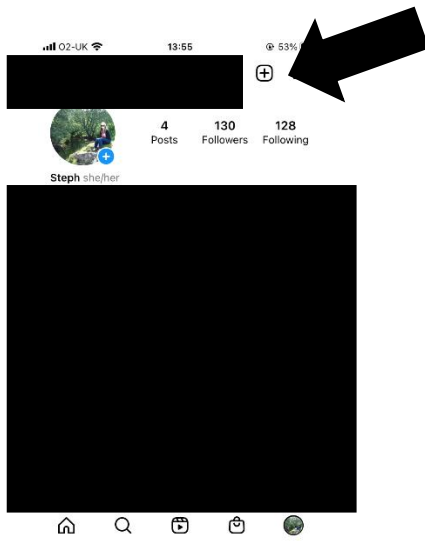


4ai. Click on settings > ads > data about your activity from partners

4bi. Now switch all the toggles off.

## 5. How to upload pictures or videos

5a. Go to your profile and click on the 'plus' icon in the top right



5b. Select 'post'.

## **6. Report and blocking an account**

6a. Click on the account you want to report's username.

6b. Click on the three horizontal dots in the top right corner > select report user > select the type of account you want to report and follow the on-screen instructions.

To block an account, click on the account you want to report's username

6bi. Click on the three horizontal dots in the top right corner > select block user > select 'block username and new accounts that they may create'.

## **7. Adjusting settings to make Instagram collect as little data on you**

You will need to go to your phone settings to reduce the amount of data collects on how you use the app.

7a. Navigate to Settings, then tap on Apps and find Instagram. Here you can see whether you've given it permission to access your location, microphone, device storage, contacts, and more. You can turn these settings off, allowing Instagram access to your location all the time, only while you're using the app, or never.

## **Appendix 8 - First interview questions**

### **Get to know you**

Firstly, thank you for showing interest in taking part in this project. The process of this project is twofold: (1) you will be asked to complete a scrapbook for the next 12 months, and (2) three interviews will be held with you every 5-6 months to discuss the scrapbook, of which this is one of them.

There are two sections to this interview, (1) one is to outline the project to you and what will be involved. Also a time for us to get to know each other. (2) Questions related to your experiences of the pandemic and also about being an adult. Please do talk about your gender and/or sexuality in your responses to the questions, because I am interested to see how those identities may have shaped your experiences.

- How are you?
- What were your reasons for taking part in this project? Is there anything you are hoping to get out of it?
- Is there anything concerning you about this project?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me about the project?
- Are you happy to continue with the project for the next 12 months?
- Is there anything you need to help you with the completion of the scrapbooks?

### **Demographics**

- What is your name?
- What is your age?
- How would you self-identify your sexuality?
- How would you self-identify your gender identity?
- How long have you lived in England?
- Where in England do you live?
- What is your employment status?
- What is your living situation?
- What is the highest education qualification you have, and when did you finish education?
- More personal questions: How long have you been out?
- Who are you out to?

### **Life before lockdown**

Tell me what your life was like before lockdown?

### **2 years of social distancing restrictions**

Tell me the last two years of COVID-19 has affected your life? Please take a look at the prompt card to remind yourself of the various policy changes that happened in England.

### ***Their life right now in the present***

Has your life changed in any way since the lifting of social distancing restrictions in February 2022?

### ***Adulthood and how the last two years have affected transitions to adulthood***

I'm now going to start asking you questions about becoming an adult and your own personal path to becoming an adult.

- How do you become an adult?
- How do you know you are an adult and not a young person anymore?
- What does being an adult personally mean to you?
- What is important to help you on the path to becoming an adult?
- Before the pandemic, can you describe what your path to becoming an adult was like?
- Had you achieved any of your markers?
- What helped you get there?
- In what ways has the last two years affected your path to becoming an adult?
- Why has it affected it?
- How would you like your life to be like in the next 12 months in relation to your transitions?

Thank you for taking part in this interview. After this, I would like you to start completing your scrapbook (either on Instagram or I will provide you with a scrapbook) for the next 5-6 months, and then we will have another interview together to discuss the scrapbook. Think about what you have discussed just now, especially how your life has been affected by the pandemic and what being an adult means to you, and I would like you to reflect on that while completing the scrapbook. For instance, has something happened to you that has made you reflect on being an adult, two hypothetical examples could be moving out or getting a new job? Do you feel you are getting closer or further away from that end point? Has a conversation you had with friends or family helped you? You can reflect on anything major or minor.

The data collected from the scrapbooks will be co-owned, therefore both you and I will own the scrapbook data. You will be asked to send me pictures of your scrapbooks to me if you opt for a physical scrapbook, or I will take screenshots of your Instagram scrapbook. After the data collection finishes (September, 2023), it is up to you if you want to carry on completing your scrapbook.

## **Appendix 9 - Second and third interview questions**

Tell me how the past few months have been?

What have you included in your scrapbook?

Why have you included that?

Questions will also be developed based on scrapbook excerpts and also what was mentioned in the first interview, which cannot be developed without any data.

## Appendix 10 - Participant demographics

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Housing</b>
<b>Charlie</b>	18	Cisman	Gay	Student	At home
<b>Josh</b>	18	Transman	Gay	Student	Student accommodation
<b>Ollie</b>	20	Cisman	Gay	Student	Student accommodation
<b>Aspen</b>	20	Non-binary	Bisexual	Unemployed	At home
<b>Abbie</b>	22	Transwoman	Bisexual	Student	Student accommodation
<b>Fi</b>	22	Transwoman	Lesbian	Student	Student accommodation
<b>Jesse</b>	23	Non-binary	Bisexual	Unemployed	At home
<b>James</b>	23	Cisman	Bisexual	Employed	At home
<b>Kate</b>	28	Transwoman	Pansexual	Student	Independent
<b>Oscar</b>	28	Cisman	Gay	Employed	Independent
<b>Chloe</b>	30	Transwoman	Pansexual	Self-employed	Independent
<b>Mollie</b>	21	Ciswoman	Lesbian	Student	At home

## Appendix 11 - Recruitment poster

**Tell us about how COVID is still affecting your life and becoming an adult**

**Are you:**

- (1) LGBT+**
- (2) 18-30 years old**
- (3) Live in England, UK**

**If so, I would *love* to hear from you!**



**We would like to understand what being an adult means to you as a LGBT+ young person, and how the pandemic has affected you reach those markers.**

**Participation will involve:**

**Taking part in 3 x interviews over the course of 12 months (5-6-month intervals, online or in-person, and at a time of your choice).**

**AND**

**Completing a scrapbook (on Instagram/physical one) at least once a month.**

**The scrapbook is for you to provide your reflection on how COVID is affecting you and your path to becoming an adult.**



**Lead researcher, Steph, will arrange to chat with you at a time and place that is convenient for you, or alternatively on Teams or Zoom. No travel necessary to take part**



**For more information, please send me a direct message at:**

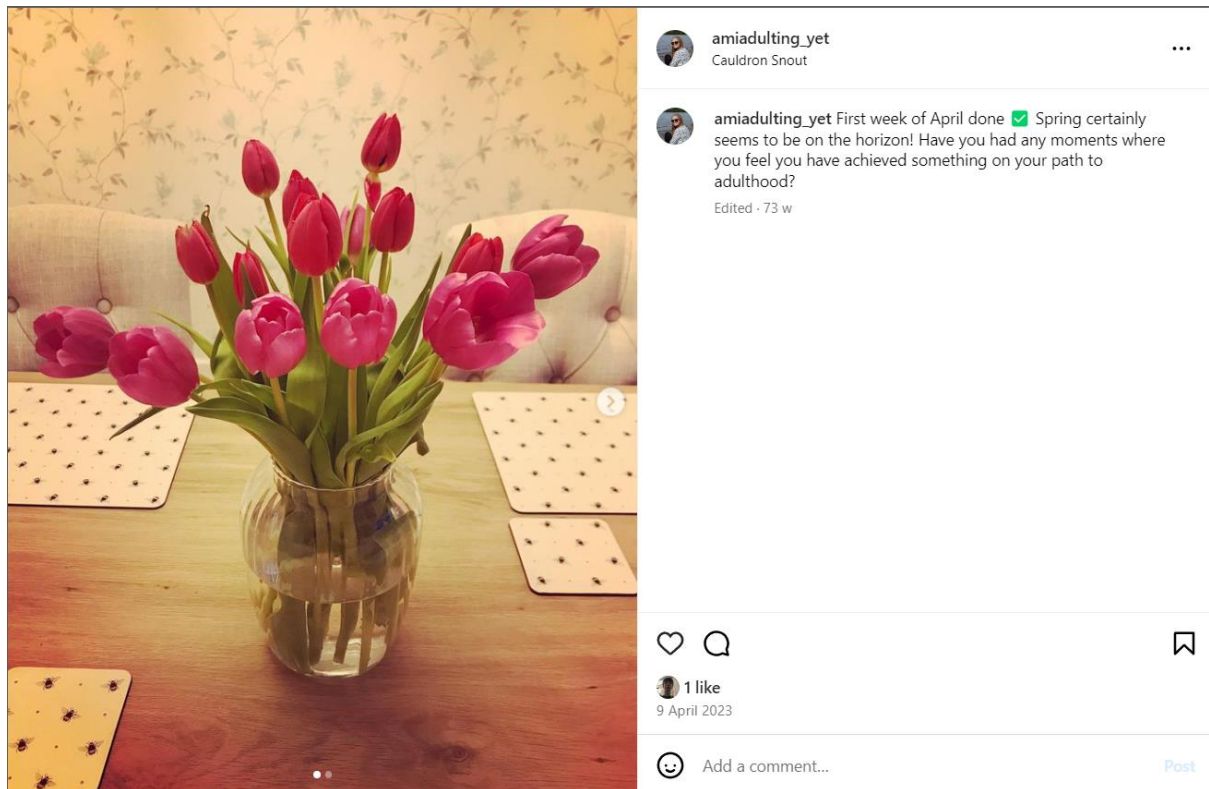
**Researcher: Steph Daw (She/Her)**

**Email: [stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk)**

**Discord: YorkshireKnitter#0088**



## Appendix 12 - Instagram posts





amiadulging\_yet



amiadulging\_yet We're now over half way through Pride month 2023, and all around the country we are seeing Pride celebrations coming together.

- 💜 Have you been to pride this month?
- 💙 How important was it for you?
- 💚 How did it feel during COVID-19 when pride celebrations were cancelled for two years?
- 💛 Did you reflect on these feelings while at pride?
- 🧡 Is being involved with LGBT+ communities important for your self-definitions of adulthood?
- ❤️ Why is it important?

Edited · 63 w



Be the first to like this  
20 June 2023



Add a comment...

Post

## Appendix 13 - Participant de-briefing sheet

### Impact of COVID-19 and its ongoing legacy for LGBT+ young people's transition to adulthood

#### Participant de-briefing sheet

**Researcher(s):** Stephanie Daw (She/Her)

**Department:** Sociology Department

**Contact details:** [stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor name:** Prof. Catherine Donovan and Dr Hannah King

**Supervisor contact details:** [Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.donovan@durham.ac.uk);  
[Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Hannah.king@durham.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking part in this study.

The data you have provided is automatically anonymised and cannot be traced back to your identity. Your individual data will not be available to anyone outside the research team. If you would like to withdraw your data from the study, please contact me at [stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk), and I will remove your data from storage. Please note that you will not be able to do this after the first 7 months of the study. If you would like further information about the study or would like to know about what my findings are when all the data has been collected and analysed, then please contact me on [stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.l.daw@durham.ac.uk). I cannot, however, provide you with your individual analysis results because of the anonymising process.

If you or someone you know has been affected by any of the issues raised in today's interview or during the research process, you can access support from the following organisations:

#### **National**

**LGBT Foundation:** A national charity delivering advice, support and information services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans communities.

Tel: 03453303030. Opening hours Weekdays 9am – 9pm, Weekends 10am – 6pm.

E-mail: [helpline@lgbt.foundation](mailto:helpline@lgbt.foundation). They will reply to you within 10 working days.

**Centred:** A community organisation run by diverse lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people.

Tel: 02074376063

E-mail: [contact@centred.org.uk](mailto:contact@centred.org.uk)

**Stonewall:** An organisation aimed at empowering LGBT people to be their authentic selves.

Freephone: 08000502020. Lines are open 9:30 to 4:30 Monday to Friday. They are operating on voicemail-only function on their phone lines. Please do leave a message, including details of the best time to call you back, and they will do their best to get back to you within three working days.

E-mail: [info@stonewall.org.uk](mailto:info@stonewall.org.uk)

**MindOut:** An LGBTQ mental health charity, promoting the emotional wellbeing of the LGBTQ community.

Online chat: <https://mindout.org.uk/get-support/mindout-online/>. Open 5:30-7:30 most evenings, and Sunday 2-4pm.

Tel: 01273234839

E-mail: [info@mindout.org.uk](mailto:info@mindout.org.uk)

**North-East specific:**

**Humankind LGBT+ North East:** If you are a young person and identify as LGBT+ in the North East, they will provide friendly and practical support.

Tel: 01325731160. Open 8:45am-4:45pm Monday-Thursday, 8:45am-4:15pm Friday.

E-mail: [lgbt@humankindcharity.org.uk](mailto:lgbt@humankindcharity.org.uk)

**Albert Kennedy Trust in Newcastle:** Supports young LGBT 16-25 year olds who are made homeless or living in a hostile environment.

Tel: 01912810099. Open Monday-Friday 10am-4:30pm.

Email: [gethelp@akt.org.uk](mailto:gethelp@akt.org.uk)

## Appendix 14 - Abbie's life grid

Life dimension	Pre-pandemic	Pandemic	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Summary	Summary codes
Education	Socially connected. Positive perspective on degree. Established routine.	Online learning. Lost routine. Isolated. Falling behind with learning activities.	Online learning. Isolated. Struggling to establish routine. Fallen out of habit attending learning spaces.	Online learning. Falling behind with assignments and exams. Struggling to establish routine. Negative perspective and mindset on degree developing. Fallen out of habit attending learning spaces. Delaying academic progress and extending deadlines.	Changing perspective and mindset on degree - settling for BSc rather than MSc. Pausing final year exams and assignments. Feeling unprepared and demotivated.	<i>Before the pandemic she was enjoying her degree, making good progress, and she had a routine established. Since the switch to online learning, things have not gone back to how they were and there has been a continued negative spiral across time. Online has continued since the lifting of restrictions and so she has not re-established her routine, she has been falling behind, and this has culminated in her enjoying her degree less and just wanting to get it completed.</i>	<b>Online learning triggering a continued decline.</b>

Employment			Feeling inexperienced for work. Feeling uncertain about job prospects.	Feeling pressure of work post-Uni. Feeling mixed about getting a job in desired sector. Feeling restricted in opportunities for desired working conditions. Anxiety of identity and career development.	Negative prospects of career developing. Feeling demotivated to apply for work. Feeling uninspired to apply for ideal careers. Feeling restricted in opportunities for desired working conditions.	<i>There is no direct link between the pandemic and employment, but there is association with other life dimensions. Feeling uncertain about career development is linked to delays in her gender transition, feeling burned out is linked to issues with education, restricted in job searching is a result of online learning is not working for her.</i>	<b>Feeling restricted in opportunities;</b> <b>Career anxiety;</b> <b>Selective working conditions;</b> <b>Feeling demotivated.</b>
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