

**COVID-19 and the university socio-cultural environment:
an exploration of the expectations and experiences of
LGBTQ+ first year undergraduate students.**

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Table of Content

List of tables	5
List of abbreviations	6
Abstract	7
Declaration	8
Copyright statement	9
Acknowledgments	10
Chapter 1 (Introduction)	11
1.1 Background	12
1.2 Identity and positioning	13
1.3 LGBTQ+ community	15
1.4 Socio-cultural environment	18
1.5 Relevance to Counselling Psychology	19
1.6 Overview and structure of the thesis	20
Chapter 2 (Literature Review)	21
2.1 Introduction	21
2.2 Research strategy for appropriate literature	22
2.3 Expectations and experiences of student life	22
2.3.1 Motivations and expectations	23
2.3.2 Student experiences	25
2.4 Experiences of LGBTQ+ students	28
2.5 Experiences of university life during the COVID-19 pandemic	35
2.6 Aims and research questions	40
2.7 Chapter summary	41
Chapter 3 (Methodology)	43
3.1 Introduction	43
3.2 Ontological and epistemological positioning	43
3.2.1 Ontology	43
3.2.2 Epistemology	45

3.3	Theoretical perspectives	46
3.4	Research Design	47
3.5	Participant Demographics and Recruitment	48
3.5.1	Sampling and Recruitment	48
3.5.2	Inclusion and exclusion criteria	50
3.5.3	Participant demographics	51
3.6	Data generation	53
3.7	Method of data collection	53
3.8	Conducting interviews	54
3.9	The interview guide	55
3.10	Transcription	56
3.11	Method of Data Analysis	57
3.11.1	Data analysis	57
3.11.2	Rationale for Reflexive Thematic Analysis	58
3.11.3	Approach to reflexive thematic analysis	60
3.11.4	Phase one: Data set familiarisation	61
3.11.5	Phase two: Data coding	61
3.11.6	Phase three: Initial theme generation	62
3.11.7	Phase four: Theme development and review	63
3.11.8	Phase five: Theme refining, defining and naming	63
3.11.9	Phase six: Writing up	64
3.12	Trustworthiness	64
3.13	Ethical Issues	66
3.14	Reflexivity	68
3.15	Chapter Summary	70
Chapter 4	(Findings)	71
4.1	Introduction	71
4.2	High expectations of university life	72
4.3	Perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences	80
4.4	Pandemic encouraging a sense of community and bonding	93
4.5	Disappointment, anger and worsening of wellbeing	98
4.6	Difficulties accessing formal support and other approaches to support wellbeing	104

4.7	Importance of LGBTQ+ community and spaces	112
4.8	Chapter Summary	121
Chapter 5 (Discussion)		123
5.1	Introduction	123
5.2	The purpose of the research	123
5.3	Key Findings	125
5.4	High hopes and expectations	125
5.5	The void between expectation and reality	127
5.6	Institution responsibility for expectation setting	128
5.7	Setting realistic expectations for future students	129
5.8	Mental health of students	130
5.9	A perceived lack of formal support	132
5.10	Barriers to support	133
5.11	Self-management of well-being	134
5.12	The importance of LGBTQ+ communities and spaces	136
5.13	A hostile campus culture?	138
5.14	COVID-19 a barrier to LGBTQ+ connections	140
5.15	Review of the methodology – Strengths and limitation of the study	140
5.16	Reflexive positioning	142
5.17	Recommendations and future research	144
5.18	Chapter Summary	146
Chapter 6 (Conclusion)		148
	References	149
	Appendices	165

Word count: 46,272

List of Tables

Table 1 – Description of terms related to identity as defined by Stonewall (2022)

Table 2 – Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 3 – Pseudonyms and identity descriptions

Table 4 – Advantages of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006. p. 97).

Table 5 – Disadvantages of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006. p. 97).

Table 6 – Trustworthiness criteria and actions

Table 7 – Themes from analysis

List of Abbreviations

ASC	Autistic Spectrum Condition
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 19
DA	Discourse Analysis
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
GT	Grounded Theory
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer / questioning and other sexual or gender minorities
TA	Thematic Analysis
UK	United Kingdom
UREC	University Research Ethics Committee
USA	United States of America
WHO	The World Health Organisation

Abstract

Background: Research relating to the subject of students' university experiences is often limited to exploring academic experiences or mental health struggles. This appears true for research exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ students as well as research examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. An opportunity therefore presented itself to explore an under-researched area: the expectations and experiences that LGBTQ+ first year students had of their socio-cultural university environment.

Methodology: This research used an interpretivist-constructivist lens to conduct ten semi-structured interviews with first year university students who identified within the LGBTQ+ community. Data was analysed with the use of Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis, with all six stages of the analysis process followed.

Findings: The six themes generated from the data were: the high expectations that students have of university life; the perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences; a sense of community and bonding encouraged by the pandemic; disappointment, anger and worsening of well-being; difficulties accessing formal support and other approaches to well-being; and finally, the importance of the LGBTQ+ community and spaces.

Discussion: The themes identified the importance of reducing the gap between student expectations and experiences as well as the value of university as more than a place of striving for academic success. The themes laid bare the importance of social and cultural experiences for the mental well-being of students and the consequences when these are inhibited. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ spaces and communities are demonstrated to be fundamental to well-being, personal growth, social bonding, and expression of identity. Recommendations for future research are made as well as a call for universities to consider their responsibilities in relation to supporting the well-being of LGBTQ+ students and creating a socio-cultural environment that meets these students' needs.

Key words: *Counselling Psychology; LGBTQ+ community; students; COVID-19; reflexive thematic analysis*

Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Recent decades have seen research conducted that has explored the experiences students, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer + (LGBTQ+) students, have had of university life. Within the last couple of years, studies have also focussed upon exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic has effected the experiences of students. However, there are few qualitative studies that explore the personal stories of LGBTQ+ students during the COVID-19 pandemic in depth. Exploring the socio-cultural expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ students during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic could be helpful. Helpful not least because of knowledge and learning that could be generated that may be able to contribute to planning for future pandemics but also to the improvement of the student experience overall.

The aim of this research is to develop our knowledge and understanding of the expectations LGBTQ+ undergraduate students had prior to attending university as well as their actual experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will particularly focus upon the expectations and experiences of the socio-cultural environment of university life. There is a hope that knowledge will be generated that provides insights into the broader experiences of LGBTQ+ students, including how their socio-cultural environment may influence mental well-being, the importance of community; and how the needs of students can be effectively met.

In this chapter, I will start by providing a brief background to the origins of this thesis before identifying myself as a researcher and defining the key terms and phrases. I will then explain the relevance of this project to counselling psychology and finally provide an overview of the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Background

Towards the end of 2019, following an outbreak of pneumonia in the Wuhan region of China, it was becoming apparent that there was a new disease that was concerning for all (Ciotti et al., 2020). By 2020, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was discovered. The newly discovered virus went on to travel across the world and cause a disease known as Corona Virus Disease 19 (COVID-19) (Ciotti et al, 2020). As a result, this event in history became known as the COVID-19 pandemic. As of September 2022, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022) reports that there have been 600,555,262 confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the globe. At the time of writing, sadly the total reported global deaths from COVID-19 stands at 6,472,914 (WHO, 2022). Alongside the HIV pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic is without question one of the most destructive global health emergencies of the last one hundred years.

In addition to the horrendous health issues and the loss of life that the COVID-19 pandemic caused, citizens of nearly all nations were confronted with once unthinkable challenges. In the United Kingdom (UK), in a desperate attempt to save lives, the health system and stop the spread of the virus, a “lockdown” was introduced which persisted in different forms for nearly a year and a half. Although there were different variations of “lockdowns” and “social restrictions” during the height of the pandemic, the initial lockdown involved staying at home, only being allowed to leave home once a day for a short period of time unless there was an emergency. When leaving the home, individuals were not permitted to have any social contact with a person outside of those they may live with. Similar to many other countries, the UK enforced restrictions that meant you could not live the life you once lived. It was not permitted to meet friends, go to a restaurant, engage with a sporting activity nor say goodbye to loved ones in hospital.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a huge challenge to education systems too (Daniel, 2020). Almost overnight, the UK and other nations ordered schools, colleges, and universities to cease nearly all in person teaching and instead provide remote learning (Daniel, 2020). Some institutions were able to rapidly respond to this changing environment, for many it was more difficult and were faced with many challenges. I was in my first year of the counselling psychology doctorate when the pandemic disrupted my educational journey.

Fuelled by my own experiences, I was left to wonder how the pandemic had been effecting the experiences of undergraduates and those particularly in their first year. It is acknowledged in the research that the transition from further to higher education is one that is very challenging for students and can often lead to large numbers of individuals leaving university early (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Crisp et al., 2009). Furthermore, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I was led to thinking about how the university lives of the LGBTQ+ community were affected by the pandemic. Past research recognises that LGBTQ+ university students can encounter challenging environments whilst at university at the best of times due to high levels of hetero-cis-sexism (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018). Although it is documented that students are disproportionately affected by mental health difficulties, LGBTQ+ students are also disproportionately affected by such difficulties (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). Through an awareness of this intersectionality and a concern for this population of students, I chose to use this doctoral thesis to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ first year undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. I wanted to explore their expectations of university prior to the pandemic, how these expectations may have changed and discover what were their actual experiences. Due to my own experience of university being more than an education institution, I wanted to specifically learn about the social and cultural expectations and experiences that students had as well as the consequences of these. This is because attending university has often been considered to be more than a place of study. Attending university offers an opportunity to develop new connections, interact with differing cultures, discover new interests, work towards a particular career and more. University life is a complex web of experiences and opportunity that became at risk of being destroyed by the COVID-19 pandemic and so I felt it important to explore how students experienced this time in their life.

1.2 Identity and positioning

Transparency related to my identity and positioning as a researcher is important for a number of reasons. Readers that are aware of a researchers identity and positioning are able to evaluate the interpretations, claims and trustworthiness of the research more effectively. This is why I thought it important to share that this project has been influenced by my experience as a student and member of the LGBTQ+ community. The transition from further

(school or college) to higher (university) education was momentous for me. As a cis-gendered gay man, I recall moving from a further education environment where I felt like I had little control over my life, education, and identity to a place where I could develop and express myself. A place where I could choose what I wanted to learn and meet people along the way who continue to enrich my life fifteen years on. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that going to university for the first time saved my life. As a young man, I had been living in a very difficult home environment that was far from validating or accepting of my identity. Leaving for university provided freedom and above all else, safety. My experiences led me to be involved with social justice conversations that effected the LGBTQ+ community, regularly engaging in activism and protesting aimed at furthering the rights of the community. Although my days of marching in the street are considerably less frequent, my mind has had an ever greater focus upon how research could amplify the voices of minority groups and play a role in improving lives and tackling social injustices. Given my history, I hoped this research would be my own opportunity to amplify the voices of the LGBTQ+ community. By doing so, I wished only to be able to contribute to the literature in a way that could develop our understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and thus how the needs of this population can be met that would allow an enriched and fulfilling university experience.

When COVID-19 swept the world and it was clear all levels of education would be disrupted in some way, I wondered how LGBTQ+ students, attending university for the first time, would be effected. I knew how important the transition to university was for me and others in my peer group. In part, this curiosity ultimately led to the development of this research project. However, there were a number of other influencing factors. Notably, the substantial research conducted that supports the claim that students and the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately affected by mental health issues. As a result, these two identities intersecting may lead to greater mental health challenges for this population. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were various news articles that reported student protests across the UK. I recall students asserting that their education and psychological needs were not being adequately supported by their university and that they did not feel listened to. These are examples of additional factors that led me to develop a research project that aims to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in greater depth.

Given the experiences that I have had in my life, it is understandable that I will have a variety of biases, assumptions, and preconceptions that may be known or unknown to me. It is important for these to be implicitly and explicitly acknowledged so that the lenses I see the research data through are clear to all. For example, I acknowledge that I had the preconceived idea that the COVID-19 pandemic must have been difficult for all of the participants, completely overshadowing any good that could have come from a difficult time for the world. I recall entertaining the idea that a large proportion of students may have experienced worsening mental health, isolation and had little opportunity to develop social bonds with peers. Furthermore, I had doubts about students' ability to access mental health support and presumed many would be trapped in environments that were not identity affirming. I believe this perspective was partly informed by my own experiences as a gay man and spending a great deal of time immersed in literature exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in different areas of society. Much research regarding LGBTQ+ people focuses upon the issues or challenges that this community encounter. In part, a motivation of conducting this study was that I wanted to explore what issues LGBTQ+ students were confronted with and share these with the research community. However, I eventually realised that I would be unintentionally othering my own community contributing to the narrative that we, as LGBTQ+ people, are defined by issues and problems. Once realising how my own experiences, identity and beliefs could influence the direction of the research, I made a conscious effort to take a step back, open my mind and to not be led by the idea that LGBTQ+ people are plagued only with challenges. When venturing into the world of research, a wariness of my influence as a researcher was helpful. However, so too was the notion of openness. Openness and honesty with my research supervisor about my presuppositions and personal experiences led to valuable dialogue, shining a spotlight upon potential bias that could influence the research. These discussions, with the support of the reflexive journal, were crucial to the management of my reflexive process and provided me with a greater understanding of the lenses that I view the world through.

1.3 LGBTQ+ community

The LGBTQ+ population is made up a variety of communities and sub-communities. However, for the purpose of this research project, I will provide a general definition. The LGBTQ+ community is made up of individuals who may define themselves as ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’, ‘trans’ or ‘queer’ (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). Q may also be defined as ‘questioning’ whilst ‘+’ will represent other sexual identities such as pansexual and asexual. The UK based LGBTQ+ rights organisation, Stonewall, provides helpful definitions of the identities detailed above. Described by Stonewall (2022), table 1 provides a definition of terms in relation to the LGBTQ+ community. Due to their sometimes being confusion with the term LGBTQ+, I have purposefully made use of Stonewall’s detailed descriptions so that the definitions of these identities are clear and consistent with the view of most researchers.

Table 1 – Description of terms related to identity as defined by Stonewall (2022)

Identity	Meaning
Lesbian	“Refers to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term”.
Gay	“Refers to a man who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. Also, a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality - some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term”.
Bisexual / bi	“Bi is an umbrella term used to describe a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender”.
Trans	<p>“An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.</p> <p>Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender,</p>

	transsexual, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-variant, crossdresser, genderless, agender, nongender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois”.
Queer	“Queer is a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT community (racism, sizeism, ableism etc). Although some LGBT people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 80s by the queer community who have embraced it”.
Questioning	“The process of exploring your own sexual orientation and/or gender identity”.
Asexual	“A person who does not experience sexual attraction. Some asexual people experience romantic attraction, while others do not. Asexual people who experience romantic attraction might also use terms such as gay, bi, lesbian, straight and queer in conjunction with asexual to describe the direction of their romantic attraction”.
Pansexual / pan	“Refers to a person whose romantic and/or sexual attraction towards others is not limited by sex or gender”.

Stonewall (2022)

Although many within the LGBTQ+ community may identify with one or more of the above identities, it must be noted that this may not be always the case. There may be many people who see themselves as part of the community but do not wish to label themselves using the terms above or others. This research project is welcoming of all of those who identify within the LGBTQ+ community.

1.4 Socio-cultural environment

Within higher education, the student experience encompasses a wider range of experiences than that of a student's role as a learner (Dibben, 2006). Dibbon (2006) suggested that the student experience involves a wider set of beliefs and behaviours, separate to learning, that contribute to the development of social and cultural bonds. As a former undergraduate and current doctorate student, I can relate to this suggestion as it reflects my own experiences. Dibbon and others argue that despite this, a great deal of research exploring the experiences of students has largely focussed upon the academic achievements as well as the mental health of this population. A gap in the research was therefore identified and so this study hoped to pay further attention to the expectations and experiences that LGBTQ+ students have of university life beyond their role as a learner. Specifically, this project aimed to explore the socio-cultural environment that LGBTQ+ undergraduate students expect and experience in relation to their university life. Yet the timing of this research coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore providing a unique opportunity to explore how such a significant global event may influence the student experience.

Vandeyar (2010) suggested that the socio-cultural environment for university students encompasses a range of experiences, including, social experiences (within and outside of the classroom), language use, identity formation and acculturation. Vandeyar (2010) proposed that socio-cultural environment can be further influenced by a students' experience of discrimination, harassment, sense of belongingness and changes in social standing. I believe an undercurrent of this research ultimately acknowledges the idea that students' socio-cultural experiences are subjective. Each student will have an idiosyncratic perspective of what their university socio-cultural environment is and means to them. This research will embrace the aim of exploring the subjective experiences of students and as a result, I as a researcher aim to learn from participants about what they consider to be importance elements of their university socio-cultural environment. However, in order to provide boundaries to the scope of this research, I will be mindful of the research mentioned above and their understanding of the term socio-cultural environment. Although I respect the subjective experiences of participants, I have developed a view that considers the socio-cultural environment in relation to individual beliefs, values, behaviours, and social interactions within a population of people. Furthermore, the socio-cultural environment may also relate to

how differing social and cultural groups interact, the development of a sense of belongingness to a community or institution as well as the ethos that an institution may embrace may influence the campus climate. To capture the varying ideas of what can be considered a socio-cultural environment, I will use the following terms interchangeably: socio-cultural environment; social and cultural experiences; socio-cultural experiences.

1.5 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

In the UK, a humanistic value base is at the core of the counselling psychology field (Cooper, 2009; Jones Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016). A counselling psychologist can often be found with a client within a consultation room, supporting them to reduce their psychological distress. However, counselling psychology is widely seen as a field that aims to promote the well-being of others by focusing upon their subjective experiences and how these may interact with physical, social and cultural areas of life (Jones Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016). In keeping with this ethos, counselling psychologists may be engaged with research projects exploring the lives of others particularly when a population encounters on-going social injustices.

With the above in mind, this thesis is relevant to the counselling psychology field as it explores the subjective expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic, amplifying their views and thoughts. Given a centuries old history of the marginalisation of the LGBTQ+ community and that it is widely understood that students and the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately affected by mental health difficulties, counselling psychologists in protecting and promoting the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ people may be particularly interested in this research project. Undeniably therefore, this thesis embraces a social justice perspective throughout. Winter and Hanley (2015) noted that throughout the literature, it has been difficult for a consensus to be reached as to a clear definition of social justice. In light of different views surrounding the idea of social justice, I elected to focus upon the description given by Winter (2019) who described social justice in counselling psychology as: “acknowledging the importance of equality...and working towards increasing equality, minimising power imbalances and challenging discrimination or oppression” Winter, 2019, p4). I related to this view of social justice as I

feel a similar perspective has been at the heart of the activist work I have engaged in as described above.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and strengthened the inequalities embedded within UK society, with education institutions unable to be immune from this. Participants from a study conducted by Todd and Rufa (2013) described varying understandings of social justice, including that it is associated with: meeting basic needs; fixing social structures and systems to promote equality; and preserving human rights. Given the social, cultural, political, financial and health related chaos that the COVID-19 pandemic caused, it comes as no surprise that inequalities and social injustices are amplified. Therefore, the hopes of this research are that there could be a developed understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students and where appropriate, recommendations for change can be made that would be aimed at supporting the well-being and tackling of challenges that students may encounter.

1.6 Overview and structure of the thesis

This thesis is presented in six chapters. The first chapter seeks to introduce the research, researcher, and the aims of the project. The second chapter goes on to review the literature surrounding the experiences of LGBTQ+ university students and well-being. Chapter three details the methodological approach of this project and justification whilst chapter four explores the findings of the interviews conducted. Chapter five provides a discussion of the research findings, considering the implications of the findings, recommendations, and limitations of the project. Finally, chapter six will look to provide a conclusion to this research project.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will review the literature associated with the expectations and experiences that students have of their time at university. This literature is important as it can support institutions to understand how the needs of students can be met, whether this be in relation to psychological well-being, cultural needs or learning experiences. So as to be transparent about the work included in this thesis, the strategy for discovering appropriate literature is described below. Following this, literature is presented in three major sections. The first of these examines the research surrounding the expectations and experiences of university students. Helpfully, most research exploring the expectations and experiences of university students has centred around those going into or currently in their first year of study. In this chapter, I have purposefully focussed upon exploring the views of first year students, although there may be some literature that is introduced that describes the experiences of students from different year groups. Secondly, I focus upon the expectations and experiences of first year university students in general before specifically investigating the expectations and experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. The final section then goes on to explore the experiences of students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research aims to explore the expectations and experiences that LGBTQ+ first year undergraduate students have had with regards to their university socio-cultural environment during the pandemic. This contrasts to previous research exploring the expectations and experiences of university students which has heavily focussed upon academic and learning experiences. This review aims to shine a spotlight upon the social and cultural expectations and experiences of students and detail why these are important to understand, particularly for students who identify within the LGBTQ+ community.

2.2 Research strategy for appropriate literature

The foundation and inspiration for substantial and useful research is a thorough and sophisticated literature review (Boote & Beile, 2005). Boote and Beile (2005) argued that a researcher cannot perform significant research without understanding existing literature, the strengths, and weaknesses of existing studies and what they might mean. Knowledge of what has gone before is important as it will inform the direction and presentation of new research. To support the development of a thorough and sophisticated literature review, a strategy was devised to guide the literature review process. Databases were used to discover relevant research and theory, including: PsycINFO, Scopus; and Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC). Synonyms of words related to the research project were used to help find relevant literature for example: university; college; and higher education. Additionally, Google Scholar was used to aid the search for relevant literature as well as the reference lists for interesting papers that I may have encountered. The strategy for finding and reviewing appropriate literature was not the same as might be expected when conducting a systematic review although it was helpful to have some structure to the approach in order to demonstrate a sophisticated literature review. It is worth noting that efforts were made to primarily review UK based peer review journal articles, organisational reports, and policies. As my sample population all studied in England, I mainly focussed upon UK based literature so that their expectations and experiences were discussed through a closely linked and relevant lens.

2.3 Expectations and experiences of student life

Developing an understanding of the expectations and experiences of university students is important because they may have an influence upon the way a student learns and the academic success they may have (Money et al., 2017). Byrne et al. (2012) stated that the expectations of students may be influenced by the type of course and university they chose, aligning with their own values and personalities. Therefore, institutions being aware of the expectations and experiences of their students can aid an institution to respond appropriately, even if it is questionable as to whether all the needs of students can be realistically met (Money et al, 2017).

2.3.1 Motivations and expectations

The expectations that students have before going to university will vary and be influenced by a variety of factors including personality and cultural influences (Balloo, Pauli, & Worrell, 2017a). Money et al (2017) commented that students are encouraged to attend university in the expectation that this will help their career prospects, enhance social connections and be a valuable learning environment. Yet Phinney, Dennis and Osorio (2006) suggested that students from Western cultures tend to go to university for career and personal growth reasons. The findings of a study by Balloo et al (2015) supported this claim, discovering that developing social connections were less important for their participants overall. However, it was noted that those students with fewer additional responsibilities (for example, being a young carer) were more interested in university as a place to develop the social self. This demonstrates that the motivations for attending and the expectations had for university vary dependent upon an individual's life and circumstances (Crisp et al., 2009).

It has been reported by some that students view their role within an institution as a consumer and therefore have particular expectations as to what they will be given for the money that they part with (Levine, 1993). This appears mostly in relation to the learning experience and not in relation to social and cultural exploration. However, in a 2009 paper Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordström (2009) proposed that despite being very different to being at school, newly enrolled university students go on to expect a system that they are used to (for example, regular access to tutors). This view is exemplified in the work undertaken by Hassel and Ridout (2018) who also suggested undergraduate students attending university for the first time actually expect a great deal from university life.

In their study, Kember, Ho and Hong (2010) proposed that there are a number of ways in which we can understand motivations for going to university for the first time. These suggested motivations give an insight into the expectations that soon to be undergraduate students have of their university life. Kember et al (2010) labelled the nine motivations as:

1. Compliance – the belief that going to university is normal.

2. Individual goal setting – a target(s) that a student set themselves relating to completing academic tasks.
3. University lifestyle – the social life that university or university towns can offer.
4. Sense of belonging – the desire to develop cohesive relationships with peers, staff, and the institution.
5. Family – Influenced by family to attend university because either there had been no graduates in the family or there had been and therefore it was an expectation.
6. Student peers – Students influencing and encouraging each other to journey to higher education.
7. Teachers – Encouraging students to continue with education and to do well academically.
8. Financial – Going to university would mean potentially accessing a higher paid job and a job that meets aspirations.
9. Interest – Motivated by an interest in a particular area of study.

These motivations appear to align with the work of other researchers who have commented, for example, that students hope and expect to be a part of a community, to excel in their education environment, develop their identity and live a lifestyle that involves meeting new people and engaging with new activities.

Crisp et al (2009) described the life of a student as complex due to the need to juggle many different commitments. This may vary from academic and social commitments to paid employment and commitments to family. This can understandably be stressful at times, especially when transitioning to higher education (Hassel & Ridout, 2018) and needing to pay attention to their own personal and social needs (Crisp et al, 2009). Crisp et al (2009) highlighted that long before the COVID-19 pandemic, some UK universities introduced remote and flexible learning, providing video recordings of seminars and lectures.. Such a flexible approach, in part designed to make education more accessible, was suggested to help those students who may need to be within paid employment and unable to attend daytime face to face classes.

The motivations and expectations of students prior to university are likely to influence the actual experiences that students go on to have in their first year and beyond

(Balloo et al., 2017a) From a review of the literature, it appeared to be common place that students' expectations of university life diverge from the actual experience that institutions can provide (Crisp et al, 2009; Balloo et al., 2015). This may be because of a number of reasons, including a misunderstanding about the culture of the university or because an institution has failed to understand the expectations of students and has not adapted (Crisp et al, 2009). Money et al (2017) stated that where expectations of university life are not met, this may lead to students withdrawing and not fully engaging with their course of study. This presents a situation whereby the transition from further to higher education becomes a dynamic environment impacted by ever developing student expectations (Nadelson et al., 2013). Additionally, they argue that a further issue is the difference between student and staff expectations, particularly with regards to the first year of an undergraduate course. This predicament makes it all the more important for staff members and the institution as a whole to continue listening to the voices of students and communicate what to realistically expect from an institution (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). There are many reasons why this should be cared about but Crisp et al (2009) stated that it is important not least to student retention and engagement.

2.3.2 Student experiences

A university is a place that provides an educational service through teaching and learning activities (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Unsurprisingly though, the findings of research by Ahn and David (2019) demonstrated that students tend to apply greater meaning to their university experience beyond the functional definition. University becomes more than an educational service. Students find that it becomes a temporary home, where adventures occur, friendships develop, identities blossom and independence is enjoyed. These factors ultimately feed into a student's sense of belonging. The feeling of being included and accepted by an institution (Ahn & Davis, 2019).

In their study, Nadelson et al (2013) stated that on the whole, they found that first year undergraduate students had a positive experience of university life. Although, this is not always the case due to misaligned expectations with the reality of university. Many students might have difficult experiences at university for a variety of reasons and have concerns that

they wish to be addressed by their institution. Heron (2019) points out that knowing how students experience university life is important, especially as the scrutiny and ranking of universities becomes ever more influential. Heron (2019) described how a variety of surveys are used to capture the student experience, most notably The National Student Survey. Surveys such as this seek to capture the experiences that students have of teaching and the levels of resources that they as students may have access to. Heron (2019) argues that a problem with national student experience surveys is that often they have low response rates and do not encourage the capturing of qualitative data which would be helpful to understand the experiences of students in greater depth. However, there have been many helpful surveys completed. A 2017 investigation by Money et al (2017) found that overall students had a positive experience of university life and there was not much difference between the feedback of first and second year students. Students felt that they were able to develop knowledge and skills in the way they anticipated and that expectations surrounding social life were fulfilled. However, the study highlighted that students felt there needed to be a greater focus upon helping students access support services. Alongside formal support services, there may be other ways in which students can be supported to gain the most from their university experience. In her paper, Heron (2019) suggested that there is great power in the relationship between friends and it is the care within friendships formed at university that is central to a positive student experience. This view supports the idea that university is not just a place of learning but one which can provide unique life experiences and an opportunity for a person to develop the social self.

Attending university is also an opportunity to meet others from different backgrounds and to develop understanding of other cultures. Yu and Moskal (2018) stated that through developing connections with international students, British students are able to interact with and develop an understanding of other cultures which can be helpful for a variety of reasons. These include preparing a young person for a globalised labour market and supporting the development of a broader worldview (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Yu & Moskal, 2018). However, in their paper, Yu and Moskal (2018) suggested that Chinese undergraduate students encountered frequent barriers to intercultural contact leading some to feel vulnerable and de-powered within the university social and cultural environment. As a result, it has been argued that the lack of diverse environment inhibits student development and cross-cultural learning. Similarly in an earlier paper, Leask and Carroll (2011) reviewed the literature surrounding internationalised student experiences and found that many

international students reported very little social contact with British students during their undergraduate degree. Leask and Carroll (2011) highlighted that many researchers commented on how ideal it would be to have cross cultural learning and social experiences, however it remains an ideal and greater efforts need to be made to develop this area of the student experience.

University can be a rewarding and joyful experience for many, however there can be a great many challenges too. Hassel and Ridout (2018) commented that there are many students who may experience anxiety and distress during their first year at university, this often fuelled by the transition to higher education and the discovery of a mismatch between expectations and the reality of the new phase of their life. Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt and Alisat (2016) supported this position. They asserted that prior to attending university, students were filled with joy at the prospect of a parent free environment and an environment that would be filled with new people, novel activities and stimulating academic work. Nevertheless, the reality of university life is one that is much more difficult and stressful with students finding it a struggle to adapt to a life of independence and to cope with a very different environment (Pancer et al, 2016). These stresses may ultimately lead to mental health difficulties, substance use problems and struggles with academic work. Such a claim by Pancer et al (2016) is supported by the recognition that students are disproportionately affected by mental health difficulties. Cook and Leckey (2006) stated that it is often the first year of undergraduate study that students require the most psychological support. Student counselling services have long been established to provide psychological support; however, the nature of this support varies from institution to institution (Reeves, 2017). Reeves (2017) emphasised that the nature of support services may depend upon funding provided and the culture of the university. Some universities may employ well-being advisors whilst others employ psychologists and psychiatrists.

Students who are neurodiverse may also face a number of challenges at university. Although it is important to not generalise, it is recognised within the research that some young people at university, for example who identify as experiencing Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), do have difficulties with social situations and can experience increased levels of anxiety (Casement, Carpio de los Pinos, & Forrester-Jones, 2017). In their study, Casement et al (2016) found that the experiences of student with ASC are consistently effected by institutional and systemic barriers on campus. This leads to a student with ASC to

encounter difficulties with regards to social and functional adaptations (Casement et al, 2016). It is argued therefore that greater efforts should be made by universities in order to improve the student experience for this population. Although every student is unique and has differing needs, ultimately this refers back to the idea that it is important for institutions to listen to the voices of students. To listen to their expectations, needs and experiences with a view to creating a safe and supportive social, cultural, and learning environment.

2.4 Experiences of LGBTQ+ students

Attending university for the first time is a transformative experience, often being exciting but daunting for all those who experience this moment in their life (Falconer & Taylor, 2016; Stonewall, 2021). However, for LGBTQ+ people, it may be that there are complex feelings, expectations, and considerations to reflect upon prior to university, for example how open to be with regards to their sexuality or gender identity (Stonewall, 2021). Until recently, there had been very limited research exploring the expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ students (Formby, 2015; Grimwood, 2017). Yet the current pool of research remains relatively small. As a result of limited research and inconsistent monitoring of LGBTQ+ students' experiences (Marzetti, 2018), Grimwood (2016) reported that UK based LGBTQ+ students often have lesser rates of student satisfaction rates as improvement strategies have not targeted such a population.

From the existing research, Formby (2017) reported that the experiences of LGBTQ+ students were typified by occurrences of discrimination, prejudice and bullying on campus. Formby (2015) highlighted that it is important to explore the experiences of this population as the challenges or negative occurrences that LGBTQ+ students may have will likely have an impact upon different areas of their life, for example: mental health; career prospects; sense of belonging; and university attendance. In their earlier work, Tetreault, Fette Med, Meidlinger and Hope (2013) illustrated that understanding the complex relations among campus experiences, students' perception of university experiences and their impact is important to develop an university environment where LGBTQ+ people can thrive.

After many years of limited information gathering, Stonewall (2021) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) were able to collect and study information provided by prospective LGBTQ+ university students. In their report, Stonewall (2021) found that more than half of those surveyed planned to be open with others about their sexual or gender identity. It was found that seventy-seven percent of respondents expected university to be good or very good (Stonewall, 2021). Prior to attending university, the report found that a third of those surveyed researched specific LGBTQ+ services that may be available in their university town or city. Additionally, it was found that LGBTQ+ students were more likely to be from deprived backgrounds and to declare a difficulty with their mental health. Given this and that many LGBTQ+ people still do not want to share their identity, it demonstrated a need for understanding the needs of LGBTQ+ students and to provide appropriately tailored support (Stonewall, 2021)..

Regardless of sexual or gender identity, students may have varying motivations, influences and expectations for university life, including: wanting to move away from home communities; the size of a city; course availability; and social opportunities (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). However, in his study, Taulke-Johnson's findings suggested that sexual identity did appear to influence the choices and expectations of prospective university students. Taulke-Johnson (2010) described some students as taking strategic decisions that would allow them to break away from oppressive heterosexist communities to move to more liberal, larger cities where LGBTQ+ people are more visible and social networking opportunities are rife. However, the findings outlined by Formby's (2017) study stated that heteronormativity and cisnormativity continue to prevail within university cultures and thus fuels oppression of LGBTQ+ students. Marzetti (2018) claimed that this heteronormativity and cisnormativity plays out in a number of ways on university campuses. Whether it be a lack of LGBTQ+ representation within course material, the lack of LGBTQ+ specific support within university counselling services or when the only mention of LGBTQ+ identities is when there is a discussion about a deviance from the norm (Marzetti, 2018). Marzetti (2018) described LGBTQ+ students as unwelcome visitors within university and student union spaces due to the chronic othering that occurs as a result of hetero and cisnormativity. The findings of her own study support such claims, discovering that all participants experienced queerphobia on campus and as a result, LGBTQ+ students stressed the importance of universities providing more safe spaces.

The trans+ community appear to experience the brunt of discrimination, prejudice, and stigma. O’Riordan, Jenzen and Nelson (2019) stated that in recent years, some universities have become breeding grounds for contesting the equal rights of trans people. O’Riordan et al (2019) commented that media coverage disproportionately covered the story of these breeding grounds and suggested that this made it appear the “debate” about trans rights was more widespread within academia. However, it is acknowledged that across the UK, the trans+ community encounter different challenges to their LGB peers and that they encounter high levels of hostility. This is demonstrated within a paper published by Mearns, Bonner-Thompson and Hopkins (2020) who emphasised that it is the tyranny of gender norms that bolsters oppression of trans+ students on campus, leading them to be some of the most marginalised students. In their paper, Mearns et al (2020) identified that different areas of student life can become sources of uncomfortable, unsafe, and isolating experiences, for example within student accommodation and being excluded from social situations. This is of course a terrible situation and understandably Formby (2017) argued that much more needs to be done, including structural changes, to make campuses physically and emotionally safer as well as improve the overall experience of university for LGBTQ+ students.

Similar to the findings of Mearns et al’s (2020) study, Goldberg, Kuvalanka and Dickey (2019) learned that the trans and non-binary participants of their study experienced oppression as a result of the cisnormative culture of their university. Two-thirds of student participants reported safety concerns relating to how they presented their gender, opting to appear more stereotypically gendered than they had hoped for. Goldberg et al (2019) argued that these experiences demonstrate how university campus environments reflect the binary gender system of wider society, contributing to unsafe campus cultures for the trans+ community. Additionally, Goldberg et al (2019) found that participants on average had begun questioning their gender identity whilst at school and therefore higher education environments could play a significant role in validating a student’s experiences and supporting them with their identity exploration. Goldberg et al (2019) suggested that this is further evidence as to why universities should take responsibility for providing appropriately tailored support and an improved university culture for trans+ students. However, it feels an uphill struggle for many within the trans+ community as university campus cultures are widely considered to be supported by a system based on gender binaries (Phipps, 2021). Phipps (2021) investigated the experiences of the trans community when engaging with sport at university. Phipps (2021) noted the considerable barriers that the trans+ community

encounter in sport, particularly trans women. Phipps (2021) outlined a number of positives to engaging with sport, stating that for many it is an integral part of student life. She stated that sport can be an important part of helping students to bond with their new environment, can be an opportunity to develop new social connections and can help improve well-being. Where students encounter barriers to sport, Phipps (2021) argued that this may negatively affect social skills, health, and employability. It is disappointing therefore that the highly gendered space of our universities prevents many trans+ people from engaging with sporting activities. Phipps (2021) calls for student unions and universities to take an active role in making sport more inclusive for this community.

Not all of the experiences of trans+ students are negative of course. Goldberg et al (2019) noted a number of positive findings relating to the experiences of trans+ university students within their study. It was found that many students had found staff members supportive, often open to learning and were mindful of using the requested pronouns. Additionally, a high level of participants within the Goldberg et al (2019) study were found to embrace the idea of self-advocacy, demonstrating a confidence to talk to staff and peers about their identity. Goldberg et al (2019) stated that this exhibits the resilience of many trans+ people and their ability to survive within a cisnormative environment. This may be true for many trans+ students, however it is also true to say that there are many trans+ people who experience a great deal of anxiety, inequality and hate within higher education settings. Further efforts are therefore required in order to improve the hostile campus cultures that large numbers of students encounter. In order to improve campus environments, Goldberg et al (2019) calls for improved training for staff but stated that a helpful way to begin becoming more inclusive is if institutions recognised how language use can ultimately support the dominant cisnormative discourse. Goldberg et al (2019) called for universities to consider using gender neutral language more frequently, for example, within programme materials, university documentation and the curriculum of courses. This could be an initial step to develop a university environment that is more welcoming of the trans+ community.

As per the findings of the Stonewall (2021) report, it is fantastic that on the whole, LGBTQ+ students are now looking forward to starting university more than ever. However, historically higher education institutions have provided a challenging environment for LGBTQ+ people. Only in 2018, Stonewall (2018) published a report which found that more than a third of trans student respondents had experienced negative comments by university

teaching staff as a result of their membership of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, the report found that one in five LGB students were the target of negative comments from fellow students whilst nearly half of LGBTQ+ disabled students were a particular target of hateful comments about their identity (Stonewall, 2018). The report was also able to collect qualitative data, finding a variety of issues varying from a university refusing to change a trans student's name, to overt verbal queerphobic abuse spoken in classrooms. As was suggested within the report by Formby (2015), the 2018 Stonewall investigation found that some students felt their university only showed support for the LGBTQ+ community during Pride events and often did not take on responsibility for providing LGBTQ+ specific well-being support. This lack of LGBTQ+ focussed support undeniably causes increased distress for students who are encountering hate on campus. Research by Ellis (2008) demonstrated the seriousness of incidents that students may encounter, finding that homophobia on university campuses remained a significant problem often taking the form of verbal harassment and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. Ellis (2008) found that in the main it was other students that were responsible for expressing hate and creating resistance to the creation of a LGBTQ+ inclusive campus environment. However, Ellis (2008) also noted the failure of higher education institutions to support LGBTQ+ students by not providing a safe and supportive environment that encourages inclusivity and diversity. Institutions have not been doing enough to adequately represent LGBTQ+ within their marketing campaigns, courses and where there were issues relating to discrimination and prejudice to address. Sadly, the findings of Ellis' 2008 work is only replicated in more recent academic research. As a result of persistent bullying, and harassment on campus, Glazzard, Jindal-Snape and Stones (2020) stated that the literature paints a bleak picture of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, describing how LGBTQ+ students are more likely to be diagnosed with depression and anxiety difficulties compared to heterosexual peers. However, in their study, Glazzard et al (2020) found that LGBTQ+ students had positive as well as negative experiences at university. Positives included the freedom to express sexual and gender identity as well as have the space to grow personally and professionally. Glazzard et al (2020) identified areas of transition that students found contributed to the personal development that they experienced. They were as follows:

1. Geographical transition (moving away from home).
2. Social transition (developing and maintaining new relationships).

3. Academic transition (adapting to new learning style and coping with the demands of higher education study).
4. Identity transition (development of different identities the student associated with, for example, as a student and/or LGBTQ+ person).

Glazzard et al (2020) stated that these differing transitions supported the growth of students as human beings and although some participants did have negative experiences at university, this was not a barrier to their growth. Similarly, Allen, Cowie and Fenaughty (2020) found that the environment that LGBTQ+ students experience is safe and unsafe simultaneously. This claim is supported by the literature I have described above. What this means is that it is undeniable that LGBTQ+ students are attending university at a time when students are freer to explore their identities, have legal protection and when campuses are becoming less queerphobic (Allen et al, 2020). However, research has been conducted that demonstrates LGBTQ+ students continue to be placed in vulnerable, unsafe, and marginalised environments (Allen et al., 2020; Ellis, 2008; Formby, 2017). Such environments may well lead to poorer well-being and reduced academic success (Allen et al, 2020).

Alongside the excitement, fears and challenges of attending university life, Falconer and Taylor (2016) believed the university environment is a place of transformation for LGBTQ+ students who will engage in self-exploration and personal growth. In their study exploring the transition of religious LGBTQ+ students to higher education, Falconer and Taylor (2016) stated that universities are crucial for the development of religion and LGBTQ+ identities. They say this is particularly so as universities are places of great political, social, and academic development for students (Falconer & Taylor, 2016). As an example of research that paints a safer picture for LGBTQ+ people, Falconer and Taylor (2016) claim that universities can offer a welcoming culture that provides LGBTQ+ students an opportunity to make sense of their identities and develop an idiosyncratic relationship with their religion. This potential welcoming culture and bringing together of LGBTQ+ people can provide fertile ground for identity to develop in relation to an individual's sense of self but also as part of a group of people (Walters et al, 2019). Walters et al (2019) proposed that sociality is established when people have shared experiences, characteristics, social spaces, and a common purpose thus contributing to the development of individual and group

identities. The development of an ingroup identity and sense of community has been identified as incredibly important for the LGBTQ+ population. Ceatha et al (2019) suggested that the identity affirming social environment and social connectedness that can be fostered within the LGBTQ+ community is pivotal to the provision of support and well-being of this community. The development of a shared membership of a group or community means that there can be a shared trauma experience, for example, acts of hate crime towards the community. Group membership can in part provide a sense of solidarity, community bonding and well-being support that is understandably helpful for the community (Walters et al, 2019).

According to Gnan et al (2019), universities are also able to offer LGBTQ+ specific interventions that could help to alleviate the mental health challenges that many LGBTQ+ students encounter. In their paper, they found that their own study supported previous research that has shown that LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to experience a mental health issues, self-harming behaviour, or suicidal ideation. Gnan et al (2019) suggested that as there may be specific university related risk or protective factors, this means that universities have an opportunity to support LGBTQ+ students through the difficult experiences they may have. However, participants reported many challenges at their university which could make reaching out for support a momentous task. Gnan et (2019) stated that sixty-two percent of university student participants reported that faculty staff did not consistently speak out against queerphobia and microaggressions. Instead, most participants needed to rely upon the support of peers. Furthermore, many participants felt that the LGBTQ+ issues that mattered the most to them were ignored or were talked about in a disrespectful manner. The lack of out LGBTQ+ staff members also contributed to what many students felt was an unsupportive university campus culture. Understandably, a challenging and unsupportive university environment will inevitably be a risk factor for increased mental health difficulties. A great amount of research that has been conducted therefore calls for universities to do more to support and protect LGBTQ+ students more effectively.

One way in which many more universities could support the LGBTQ+ student community is by offering students the opportunity to engage with a mentor. Sarna, Dentato, DiClemente, and Richards (2021) suggested that previous research has demonstrated the importance of mentors, mentorships, and social support for LGBTQ+ students, particularly when these students have encountered discrimination, stigma, and prejudice. In their study,

Sarna et al (2021) discovered that mentorship programmes were highly valuable to LGBTQ+ students and called for more universities to develop such initiatives. They were deemed valuable because students were able to connect with often older LGBTQ+ community members who were able to draw upon their life experience to help students find solutions to the problems they faced. These problems may have related to a student's mental health, social difficulties, or confidence levels. Sarna et al (2021) insisted that any mentoring programme should not lose sight of the individual and should be tailored accordingly. However, they were clear that a mentoring programme implemented by more universities could provide an opportunity to create more welcoming campuses and support the mental health of students. Alongside mentorship programmes, Sarna et al (2021) also asserted that it would also be helpful for there to be greater visibility of LGBTQ+ people within the staff team, including university mental health specialists. By doing so, the hope is that these people would provide a source of inspiration and reassurance, especially for those students who feel they have not been able to meet LGBTQ+ role models in wider society. The hope is that universities can pay greater attention to the many initiatives or ideas that are being suggested in order to improve the mental health of students as well as their social and cultural campus experiences which are undoubtedly intertwined. Even if a mentorship programme would not prove feasible to implement within all universities, there is certainly a case for improving the training and knowledge of staff members to help them appropriately and respectfully meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students.

2.5 Experiences of university life during the COVID-19 pandemic

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and all of the consequences that come with an international health crisis, there were profound physical, social, cultural and psychological effects (Evans, Alkan, Bhangoo, Tenenbaum, & Ng-Knight, 2021). Institutions, such as universities, could not escape the monumental changes to how educational programmes were delivered, how research was conducted and how students would experience their time at university (Appleby et al., 2022). The way in which students would experience the socio-cultural environment changed almost overnight leading to a variety of consequences, such as the deterioration of student mental health and sense of belonging to their institution.

Burns, Dagnall and Holt (2020) described the transition from further to higher education as one that is exciting but also stressful for new and returning students. They described the university experience as one that is competitive, involving many lifestyle changes and a situation that ultimately does not promote healthy well-being (Burns et al., 2020). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government enforced restrictions led to the drastic modifying of how we all live, work and learn (Savage et al., 2021). Savage et al (2021) claimed that due to consequences of the pandemic, the mental health of students deteriorated. This is particularly concerning when it is widely recognised that young adults and students are already greatly affected by mental health difficulties (Chen & Lucock, 2022; Evans et al., 2021). A 2021 study by Evans et al (2021) involved the surveying of students to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic had influenced their mental health. Over half of the respondents reported that they felt the pandemic and its consequences had impacted their mental health “quite a lot” or “very much indeed”. Additionally, they found that levels of self-reported depression had increased significantly compared to before the pandemic started, however encouragingly found that participants felt they were eventually able to adapt to a changing society. Participants’ alcohol use reduced during the initial stages of the pandemic which may be accounted for by the severe reduction in social opportunities for students. This finding in itself demonstrates a change to the social and cultural experiences of students, a phenomenon that was also observed in the work of Jaffe, Kumar, Ramirez and DiLillo (2021).

Similarly, to the work of Evan et al (2021) above, Savage et al (2021) found that nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health and physical activity levels of student participants deteriorated whilst sedentary behaviour increased. The findings from the Savage et al (2021) study have supported other investigations into how the pandemic has influenced the mental health of students including the findings of a survey conducted by Chen and Lucock (2022). Chen and Lucock (2022) surveyed UK students and found that high levels of depression and anxiety symptoms were experienced by participants. They found, in part, the reasons for this were due to the social and cultural upheaval that government restrictions caused. For example, students could no longer engage with many of their hobbies; socialise in the same way; had to rapidly adapt to a different learning environments; and were limited to the events that they would attend and the relationships that they could build with others. Further, the work of Appleby et al (2022) supported the idea that student

mental health was affected by the loss of social and cultural activities, including attending the gym, engaging with student union societies and the ability to enhance social connectedness.

Regarding the Evans et al (2021) study, participants reported a significant shift towards “eveningness”. In essence, participants were frequently sleeping later into the day and the main focus of their day was during the evening. It was suggested by Evans et al (2021) that this could influence poorer mental health. Furthermore, it seems to demonstrate a further change in the social and cultural experiences of students. The shifting towards “eveningness” will perhaps influence the social and cultural experiences that students may engage with. Differences within the student population were also found following a study conducted by Appleby et al (2022). They found that participants who identified as female appeared to report higher levels of anxiety as a result of the pandemic, whilst older students were less likely to report a deterioration in their mental health as opposed to their younger peers (Appleby et al, 2022). Of course, there could be a number of reasons for this including background and personal beliefs.

COVID-19 and the government restrictions enforced to stop its spread meant that universities were required to deliver their educational programmes in an unexpected way from 2020 onwards. For the majority of students, lectures, seminars, and the like were facilitated remotely and so it would be understandable if there were to be a change to the sense of belonging that students and staff have to their institution. Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) stated that a sense of belonging or development of social identity is important as it encourages student engagement and attainment within higher education. This is all the more important when the transition to university can mean a major change to social networks, often needing to attend to primary relationships that have developed over years whilst engaging with new, plentiful, and diverse connections that attending university can offer (Tice, Baumeister, Crawford, Allen & Percy, 2021). As demonstrated in the study by Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) online teaching was said to negatively affect a students’ sense of belonging to a higher education environment and some students found it difficult to form relationships with teaching staff and peers. Overall, students preferred in person teaching as this in part supports the development of professional and social relationships, which are difficult to create in an online setting which may be within an environment of fear and uncertainty for the world (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020). Tice et al (2021) described the difficulties with forming relationships with teaching staff the most disruptive component of the declining

sense of belonging. They suggested that this social separation may have had a negative influence upon a student's learning process (Tice et al, 2021). However, so too did the lack of plentiful and diverse connections caused by social restrictions. Tice et al (2021) found in their study that although some students did have an opportunity to meet new people when arriving at halls of residence, students often found themselves "stranded" and although physically close, developing a friendship was not a given when living in a shared space was at its core, a matter of convenience (Tice et al, 2021). This is an example of how difficult it must have been for first year undergraduates living in halls of residence to develop connections with a small group of people, without being able to explore wider social connections.

A study by Wilson, Tan, Knox, Ong and Crawford (2020) supported the claims that remote learning had a significant negative impact upon students. Although there was little other choice, the study by Wilson et al (2020) found that the switch to remote learning encouraged social isolation and negatively affected students' ability to develop social relationships which they say are important for academic success. Additionally, Wilson et al (2020) supported the suggestion by Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) that students became less emotionally engaged with their education and this negatively affected their sense of belonging to their education and institution. Wilson et al (2020) suggested it was then a struggle for students to develop a collective and supportive student culture, therefore there would be a negative influence upon personal growth and success (Wilson et al, 2020).

However, there are those students who embraced the shift to remote learning and embraced the flexibility that this method provided, allowing students to effectively learn from anywhere in the world (Carolan, Davies, Crookes, McGhee, & Roxburgh, 2020). Mali and Lim (2021) described the unexpected rise of remote or blended working means students have greater choice over how they learn and that different learning styles can be greater accommodated. The providing of flexible timetables can allow students to access lectures and seminars outside of the working hours of teaching staff as well (Mali & Lim, 2021). However, Mali and Lim acknowledged in their study that students continue to prefer in person learning and this is in part due to the ease in which social connections can be made. Such social interactions are clearly an important part of the university environment, not least for academic success and mental well-being.

The change to remote learning also appeared to effect some students more than others, including those from lower-income backgrounds (Kiebler & Stewart, 2022). In their study, Kiebler and Stewart (2022) found that these students may have fewer resources to support their academic work, may have had poor internet connection, unavoidable distractions at home and increased tensions between financial and educational demands. This was an environment that was not anticipated by these students when they were first set upon attending university. Understandably, these challenges may have led some students to experience a deterioration of their mental well-being.

Select groups of students continued with in person learning throughout the pandemic, for example those venturing into the nursing or medical profession. According to Carolan et al (2020), at the same time as losing a life at university that may have involved visiting campus and engaging in new social and cultural experiences, these students were facing the added pressure of needing to “make a difference” and being a “hero”. In the case of student nurses, rules in the UK were relaxed to allow final year students to opt-in to paid clinical placements in order to help the fight against the pandemic (Carolan et al, 2020). Carolan et al (2020) suggested that this was a lot of pressure for students who are often young, needing to consolidate learning and safely transition to being a graduate nurse. This example demonstrates the pressure that students experienced during this time in their life and how much university life changed for them.

The LGBTQ+ communities, like other minority groups, experience heightened risks in times of crisis (Haworth, 2021; Konnoth, 2020). In his policy document, Haworth (2021) highlighted that prior to the pandemic, many LGBTQ+ young people experienced mental health difficulties as well as financial, employment and housing insecurity disproportionate to other groups within society. The onset of the pandemic meant that young LGBTQ+ people were put at even greater risk of being left behind and not being effectively supported by the government (Haworth, 2021). Additionally, with the pandemic meaning no access to LGBTQ+ community spaces, support groups, activities and Pride events, Haworth (2021) highlighted that many in this community were not able to freely express themselves and engage with a socio-cultural environment that was safe for them. Such a situation would understandably have an unhelpful effect upon the mental well-being of young LGBTQ+ people (Konnoth, 2020). Gonzales, Loret de Mola, Gavulic, McKay and Purcell (2020) reported that LGBTQ+ university students from the United States of America (USA)

experienced elevated levels of depression and anxiety. Gonzales et al (2020) suggested that the abrupt closure of campuses led to many LGBTQ+ students being sent home to unsafe environments, where some students encountered unsupportive parents, limited access to LGBTQ+ specific campus resources and a lack of affirming social networks. The restricted ability to engage with LGBTQ+ identity affirming networks and cultural activities meant that the mental health of these young students deteriorated. Salerno, Shrader, Algarin, Lee and Fish (2021) supported the assertions that LGBTQ+ students face great difficulties, particularly with regards to worsening mental health and substance misuse. In their study, they found that in order to manage distress, LGBTQ+ students were observed to increase their consumption of alcohol following the onset of the pandemic (Salerno et al, 2021). This is in contrast to the study mentioned earlier that found that students were observed to have reduced alcohol consumptions. These opposing findings perhaps point once again to the challenges that LGBTQ+ young people may encounter with their well-being, caused by a variety of factors, however fuelled further by the COVID-19 pandemic. Salerno et al (2021) went on to suggest that LGBTQ+ youth have ultimately experienced a compounding effect in relation to the pandemic due to unique social inequalities, for example, difficulties accessing health care and socio-economic issues.

2.6 Aims and research questions

Much research has been conducted exploring the motivations, expectations, and experiences of university undergraduates. However, there has been less focus upon exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ students (Formby, 2015, 2017). Grimwood (2016) stated that one of the main reasons for this is that higher education institutions have not routinely monitored students' sexual orientation or gender identity. Where research has been conducted, it appears that there has been a focus upon exploring LGBTQ+ student experiences through an academic lens or homing in upon the challenges that LGBTQ+ young people may encounter, for example, queerphobia.

Building upon existing research, this project aims to provide an in depth exploration of the expectations and experiences that LGBTQ+ undergraduate students had during their first year of university. The research concentrates upon the socio-cultural environment that

students expected and experienced during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing there has been little research in this area thus further exploration could provide a further understanding of the experiences of university students during a time of great difficulty and trauma for the world. The findings of the project may then contribute to how institutions can effectively support students amongst other implications.

The research seeks to contribute to the following questions:

1. What expectations did first year undergraduates have of the university socio-cultural environment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have first year undergraduates experienced the university socio-cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has served to provide a background and evaluation of the recent literature relating to student expectations and experiences of university life. I have examined the literature relating to students' motivations for attending university, their expectations, and actual experiences. Initially, I examined some of the general reasons and expectations for attending university before reviewing literature that gives insight into the socio-cultural expectations and experiences students have.

A review of the literature finds that there are multiple motivations that propel students into academia as well as quite varied expectations. As detailed above, it appears that sometimes these expectations can be high and may not be able to be met by institutions. This mismatch of expectations and actual experiences may appear to cause difficulties for students. Many students starting university can face many challenges, however this is not to say that university is a negative experience. The literature review finds that there is a great deal of social, cultural, economic, and personal benefit to university life. However, it can be a challenging time for LGBTQ+ students. The literature reflects my own experience that a great deal of good can emerge from attending university as an LGBTQ+ person. For

example, one may feel comfortable to express sexuality, gender identity and be able to develop connections with other people within the community. Yet, the challenges to this community can be stark. University campuses are often deemed to be centres for hetero-cis-normativity and a large proportion of LGBTQ+ students continue to encounter hate and struggle with their mental well-being. The onset of the pandemic led to many more challenges for students and especially minority groups. Early research has demonstrated that LGBTQ+ students may have been put at greater risk of being unsupported and left behind. The pandemic drastically effected this community of students from being able to access LGBTQ+ affirming spaces, the ability to develop connections with other queer people and fuelled worsening mental health. Though it is true to say that the lives and socio-cultural experiences of all university students drastically changed, especially with the shift to mostly remote learning.

As mentioned, literature exploring the socio-cultural expectations and experiences for first year LGBTQ+ students are limited and it is hoped that this thesis will serve to complement existing knowledge. At the time of writing, I was not able to find specific research that explored socio-cultural experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be particularly interesting to explore this area further and contribute to the growing research pool.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology, design and procedures related to this research project. As stated above, the aim of the research project was to explore the expectations and experiences that LGBTQ+ undergraduate students had of their university socio-cultural environment prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 3.2 of this chapter will seek to explain the ontological and epistemological positionings that I took when engaging with this project whilst section 3.3 will elaborate upon the theoretical perspectives that I have embraced. Following this, the research design (3.4), participant demographics, recruitment strategy (3.5), data generation method (3.6) and method of analysis (3.7) will be outlined. Additionally, section 3.8 will demonstrate how I have approached the idea of trustworthiness within this research before section 3.9 details any ethical issues that this research presented. Finally, I will provide a reflexive account relating to my experiences of conducting this research and provide a summary to this chapter to close.

3.2 Ontological and epistemological positioning

3.2.1 Ontology

For any project, it is important to set out the ontological and epistemological positionings of the research and researcher. In this section, I will outline the positions I have taken when engaging with this research and how these may have influenced methodological decisions. It is important to be transparent of my own positionings at the very least to demonstrate how I was able to determine what would be the most appropriate methodology to engage with during this research project.

Ontology is the study of “being” and is concerned with “what is”, a focus upon the study of reality and what can be determined as reality (Slevitch, 2011). Guba and Lincoln (1994) described ontology as a patterned set of assumptions that concern reality. Slevitch (2011) stated that by acknowledging this and the ontological position that is being engaged with by a researcher, this can then aid with establishing the process of “knowing”. The ontological position I have engaged with for this study is that of constructivism. Guba and Lincoln (1994) described constructivism as: “realities are apprehensible in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature...and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110 – 111). I therefore understand a constructivist position to be one that embraces differing experiences and social discourse, allowing individuals to construct knowledge and understanding of themselves, others, and the world.

Supporting Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) stance, Dieronitou (2014) described constructivism as an appropriate paradigm for conducting qualitative research. In her paper, Dieronitou (2014) stated that research based on constructivism will involve an emphasis upon the particular to the general, depicting the constructed knowledge of an individual as accurate as possible in order to create a general understanding that could be applied to others and situations more widely. In this study, it is hoped that the findings of a relatively small amount of participants will enable the development of our understanding of their experiences and give insight into the possible experiences of many others. Given this research project aimed to amplify the voices of LGBTQ+ people by exploring their subjective experiences, an appreciation and acknowledgement of multiple realities and truths suited a qualitative design. When reflecting upon the position I hold and lenses I view the world through, I did consider engaging with Critical Theory. Lincoln and Guba (1994) described Critical Theory as:

“A reality is assumed to be apprehensible that was once plastic, but that was, over time, shaped by a congeries of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors, and then crystalised into a series of structures that are not taken as real”
(Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 110).

Howell (2016) described constructivism and Critical Theory as inherently linked, both underpinned by an attempt to understand by experience and operationalised via largely qualitative research methods. In this thesis, I will embrace a constructivist position, yet remain engaged with Critical Theory associated with the struggles that LGBTQ+ people encounter.

3.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge (Slevitch, 2011). Developing an epistemological position involves exploring what is knowledge, determining its source, how we gain it and what is legitimate (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hofer, 2001; Slevitch, 2011). Identifying the epistemological position of this research and my own beliefs is important so that the reader can gain a greater understanding of how knowledge is explored and produced in relation to this project. Given the constructivist ontological approach that I have taken and the roots of this within idealism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Slevitch, 2011), it appeared appropriate to take an approach that co-constructs knowledge and understanding. Dunham, Grant and Watson (2014) described idealism as philosophy on a grand scale, combining micro to macroscopic experiences to develop perspectives or knowledge about a particular subject. This relates to the idea that realities are mental constructs which will be informed by a great deal, including ideas.

As an investigator of the research information being explored, I will use an interpretivist lens. As an investigator or inquirer though, Slevitch (2011) stated that researchers should pay attention to the following: “an inquirer can only offer his or her interpretation (based on values, interests, and purposes) of the interpretations of others (based on their values, interests, and purpose)” (Slevitch, 2011, p. 77). The interpretivist approach focusses upon a participants subjective experiences and appreciates the subjective experiences of the researcher (Dieronitou, 2014). This study seeks to understand the subjective experiences of young people and how these experiences may interact with the world or may be similar to others. However, I believe it to be incredibly difficult for the experiences of participants and researcher to be isolated from each other. As a researcher, it is likely that my own experiences and perceptions of the world will influence my understanding of the participants’ experiences. The knowledge acquired from this research project will

ultimately be co-constructed which I hope can encourage an expansion of knowledge and promote ideas that could support LGBTQ+ students. The qualitative design to this research project will aid the in depth exploration and interpretation of subjective experiences of young, LGBTQ+ people. The findings of this exploration and interpretation process may well support the development of knowledge that could cause helpful change.

3.3 Theoretical perspectives

A humanistic theoretical perspective is what has been primarily engaged with throughout this project. Alongside this, Queer Theory has been an additional lens that this research has been viewed through. Engaging with this research project through a humanistic psychology lens is relevant as the study has aimed to appreciate the uniqueness of each individual. Smith (2016) stated that humanistic psychology focusses upon the human experience and gives validity to it; as well as validating human values, intentions, and meanings. Ultimately, this research project is one that aims to amplify the views of students and their unique experiences. A move away from a humanistic approach would risk invalidating their experiences.

Alongside the humanistic perspective to this study, it felt appropriate and somewhat unavoidable (due to my own experience and positioning) that this project would be seen through the lens of Queer Theory. The project is specifically exploring the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ students. As the LGBTQ+ community continue to be a minority group that encounters oppression in differing forms (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018) and due to this population being disproportionately affected by mental health issues (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011), it seemed appropriate to engage with the lens of Queer Theory. The Queer perspective, developed by Foucault (1978), promotes an exploration beyond the boundaries of heteronormativity, rethinking the ideas behind gender and sexuality. Students are likely to be influenced by the power of big, heteronormative institutions such as university as well as by the socio-cultural environments that they foster (Frank & Cannon, 2010). Being curious of these power structures and cultures and the ripple effect that they have upon student discourses only seemed too relevant.

Due to a desire to explore the real life experiences of students without making too many assumptions prior to data collection, an inductive approach was taken to the study. The aim of the study was not to test or derive a theory from the data. The hope was to develop an understanding of individual experiences and move to a point where general propositions and themes could be considered. This hope became a reality as the data analysis was a largely inductive process that led to findings which will be explored with theory within the discussion chapter of this thesis.

3.4 Research Design

Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002) stated that qualitative research aims to explore the meanings and experiences of human lives and social worlds. Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020) stated that one of the most distinctive aspects of qualitative research is that a researcher is able to identify issues from the perspectives of participants and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviours, events, or objects. Given the research topic, questions and what was hoped to be explored in this study, an inductive, qualitative approach appeared appropriate. Furthermore, given the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical positioning of the project, the decision to engage with a qualitative methodology is supported.

As a student of Counselling Psychology, a thread throughout this research project is that of social justice. The meaning of social justice appears to be frequently discussed within academic text but it could be described as, “the basic valuing of fair and equitable distribution of resources, rights and treatment for marginalised individuals and groups of people who do not possess equal power in society” (Linnemeyer, Nilsson, Marszalek, & Khan, 2017, p. 99). As mentioned in the first chapter, I have elected to embrace Winter’s (2019) ideas relating to social justice but have been mindful of the views of others. In their paper, Hailes, Ceccolini, Gutowski, and Liang (2020) proposed that there are three domains that make up the ethics of social justice. According to Hailes et al (2020) these domains are:

1. Interactional justice: relating to relational dynamics, considering power dynamics and fairness of how people are treated.

2. Distribution justice: relating to the perceived fairness of outcomes (for example, pay or criminal sentences).
3. Procedural justice: relating to just processes or the fairness of process for making decisions that impact the lives of others.

Lyons et al (2013) suggested that qualitative research and its links to psychology can be a fighting force against social injustices. Dependent upon the findings of the research project, the qualitative approach taken to this study may lead to important changes to how we tackle issues that LGBTQ+ students encounter.

3.5 Participant Demographics and Recruitment

3.5.1 Sampling and Recruitment

A total of ten students were interviewed for this research and were recruited by advertising the study to LGBTQ+ student union societies and undergraduate degree courses. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted remotely but were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule that can be found within the appendices (appendix 1).

Guided by the work of Braun and Clarke (2019b), a sample size of ten to fifteen participants was aimed for. The idea of reaching appropriate levels of information power was a guiding principles as to when recruitment of participants should cease (as well as time constraints). Braun and Clarke (2019b) suggested that researchers using reflexive thematic analysis should move away from the idea of data saturation points and monitor the information power that the data is exhibiting. This study managed to recruit ten participants and following a review of the transcripts and given the minimum participant count had been reached, it was determined that enough data had been collected to be considered powerful. All but one of the participants were based within Manchester, a large and diverse city in the north of England known for its rich and vibrant LGBTQ+ community.

In order to recruit participants, non-probability sampling techniques were deployed. Alkassim et al (2016) stated that non-probability sampling does not value randomisation like probability sampling. Instead, it is a sampling technique that does not give all the population an equal chance to be included (Alkassim et al., 2016). There are five main types of non-probability sampling: self-selection, purposive, quota, convenience and snowball (Galloway, 2004). For this research project, convenience and snowball sampling were responsible for the recruitment of the research participants. The use of these non-probability techniques was useful for the study as it allowed the specific targeting of students and of those who identify within the LGBTQ+ community. A further advantage of this sampling approach is that it involves no financial cost. This was important as the research project has not been funded and is offering no financial incentives to participants to be involved. Galloway (2004) described convenience sampling as: “the most common non-probability sample. You might send invitations to people in you company, students from a school...”. (Galloway, 2004, p. 1). Whilst snowball sampling was described as: “a type of convenience sampling in which those participants invited, invite other participants and so on to create a pyramid effect” (Galloway, 2004, p. 2)

Alkassim et al (2016) described convenience sampling as a process where a population is targeted as they meet certain practical criteria, such as being easily accessible, have the willingness to participant and reside in convenient geographical locations. For this study, the majority of participants were recruited by convenience sampling whilst two were recruited via snowballing. This majority were recruited by contacting Student Union LGBTQ+ societies and asking them to advertise the Participant Recruitment Leaflet (appendix 2). The Participant Recruitment Leaflet was also shared with undergraduate psychology department of The University of Manchester. The two participants who were recruited via snowball sampling stated that they were informed by other participants of the study and therefore wanted to involve themselves. Overall, twenty three Student Union LGBTQ+ societies across England were contacted and as a result the participants of this study were from three different universities.

With the aid of email and the Participant Recruitment Leaflet, attempts were made to recruit participants via other means. University staff LGBTQ+ societies, third sector organisations and community groups were all contacted and agreed to advertise the research project. Additionally, leaflets were dispersed around the main campus buildings of The

University of Manchester. However, it is believed that none of these attempts to advertise and recruit participants led to any success. A leaflet was used so that students did not feel any pressure to be involved with the research project. The leaflet was a tool to promote intrigue and further discussion as to whether a student would be interested as well as eligible to take part in this study. If a student decided that they would be willing to take part in the research, they were asked to contact a secure, university email address to express their interest. Once they had done this, they were welcome to ask any questions about the research project and were then provided with the Participant Information Sheet (appendix 3). Participants were asked to take some time to read the information sheet and then to make further contact if they would be happy to participate in the study.

3.5.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Students were invited to participate in the study if they were an undergraduate at an English university, identified within the LGBTQ+ community and were able to speak the English language. It was decided that there would be a focus upon students from English universities because through the COVID-19 pandemic, the four nations of the UK took different approaches to how they managed the on-going health crisis. Therefore, the aim was to gain some consistency with the experiences of all participants. It was also decided that the focus would be upon the 2020 – 2021 academic year as this set of students would have been the first set of students to begin university life where COVID-19 restrictions were now the norm. Being able to speak English was important to the study as there were sadly no funds to be able to provide an interpreter. However, it is unlikely that this would have been a barrier to a student wanting to be involved given the minimum English language requirements that universities expect students to have. Finally, heterosexual people were excluded from the study as the focus of the research is upon the experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Table 2 details the full inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study.

Table 2 – Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify within the LGBTQ+ community. • All gender identities welcomed. • First year undergraduate during the 2020 – 2021 academic year. • Attended a university in England during the 2020 – 2021 academic year. • Able to speak the English language. • Has access and the means to participant in a remote interview. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not identify within the LGBTQ+ / identifies as heterosexual. • Not a first year undergraduate during the 2020 – 2021 academic year. • Attends or attended a university outside of England. • Not able to speak English. • Not able to attend a remote interview.
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3.5.3 Participant demographics

All participants were first year undergraduate students during the 2020 to 2021 academic year and considered themselves a part of the LGBTQ+ community. Other than capturing age, a decision was made to not ask participants to commit to specific or binary demographic information. Instead, at the end of the research interview, participants were asked via an open question to outline how they would describe themselves. The reason for this was so that the research project would be inclusive of all identities in a world which is moving away from hetero-cis-normative boundaries more than ever. Coleman-Fountain (2014) stated that young people are increasingly abandoning identities such as “gay” or binary gender norms (Elias & Colvin, 2019) as they do not believe that a noteworthy way of describing or categorising a person. Cover (2018) suggested that there are new, more expansive, norms that are being developed that allow a person to be more specific and personal in terms how they may identify. As a result of this shift in how humans may identify, participants were able to give their own view as to how they identify rather than be presented with binary options. Seven participants were nineteen years old; two participants were twenty years old; and one was forty three years old.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, each were asked to choose their own pseudonym. The table below documents how each participant described themselves when asked at the end of the interview.

Table 3 – Pseudonyms and identity descriptions

Pseudonym	Description from transcript
Ellie	<i>“Queer is what we’re going for”.</i>
Anne	<i>“I’m kind, caring, I like helping people, a people person. As for sexuality, I never say...I just say...I am just me. It’s something I have always said. I don’t like...don’t really like labels. I am just me”.</i>
Adam	<i>“Gender non-confirming man”.</i>
Mary	<i>“I would consider myself white British. I would say that I prefer the kind of label of Queer because it really encompasses my experience and my feelings of my sexuality and my gender”.</i>
James	<i>“I’m a white, eastern European trans man”.</i>
Michael	<i>“My pronouns are he/him. I label myself as male, queer / gay. It is kind of fluid. I am half Asian. Half British”.</i>
Ashford	<i>“I like to use the term Queer because it allows for movement I guess. I think throughout your life, you’re never going to stay the exact same place on a spectrum in terms of how you feel about anything really”.</i>
Nancy	<i>“Bisexual because I think it’s a big part of me. And I’m definitely very outgoing about that as well as everything else. I’m not really, I would never really hide anything from anybody anymore. Yeah. I wouldn’t really talk about, like, race or anything because being white I don’t really think it is something you really mention because...I dunno...because we don’t have any struggle being white, I don’t think it is relevant to, sort of, mention”.</i>
Jake	<i>“I would say white, British, male, cis-gender, homosexual, atheist”.</i>

Sapphire	<i>“A Queer Muslim”</i> .
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3.6 Data generation

Qualitative research can aid a researcher to explore the in depth thoughts and feelings of research participants. This can enable the researcher to develop an understanding of the meanings that can be attributed to differing experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Understanding the experiences and the meanings of these experiences is an essential component of this research project. Through discussion with a research supervisor, differing data generation strategies were considered such as focus groups and one to one interviews. Although focus groups are often applauded for being an environment that can generate rich data (Barrett & Twycross, 2018), it was decided that one to one, semi structured interviews would be the most appropriate way to explore the experiences of the participants. Given COVID-19 restrictions preventing in person contact and potentially sensitive and very personal topics being explored, it appeared that using one to one interviews would be the most useful method of data collection.

3.6.1 Method of data collection

Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008) stated that interviews are the most common method for qualitative based data collection and comprise of three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured interviews involve predetermined questions with very little scope to use follow up questions to expand upon a point (Gill et al, 2008). Whereas an unstructured interview involves little to no organisation, often beginning with a very open question that allows a participant to take a conversation in any way of their choosing. These two types of interview did not appear to be appropriate for this research project. A structured interview may have severely impacted the exploration of participant experiences and the meaning of these experiences. An unstructured interview may have led to similar issues and perhaps could have led to a lack of focus and research questions remaining unanswered.

Baumbusch (2010) stated that semi-structured interviews are a valuable way of exploring the experiences and perspectives of participants, potentially leading to the collection of a rich amount of data. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) supported this assertion, stating that semi-structured interviews permit a deep exploration of experiences because of the two-way communication that is involved. Barrett and Twycross (2018) stated that it is possible for there to be a well-designed semi-structured interview schedule that captures a rich amount of data whilst still allowing a researcher to inject personality and flare into the process. Gill et al (2008) defined semi-structured interviews as an interview that consists of several pre-determined questions that aim to give focus but can involve an interviewer diverging to explore an idea or experience in greater depth by the use of additional questioning. This approach therefore appeared to be appropriate for this research project. The semi-structured nature of the approach permitted there to be a direction to the interview but still permitting flexibility to explore the individual experiences of each participant in relevant amounts of depth.

3.6.2 Conducting interviews

Due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, all interviews were conducted remotely using the 'Zoom' platform. Due to university and Government guidelines, it was not possible to conduct in person interviews, however the 'Zoom' video call function still gave an opportunity to see as well as talk to a participant.

As a trainee counselling psychologist with experience in a clinical setting, I believed it to be important to separate the therapist from the researcher when engaging with this project. When interviewing participants, I was not to be their therapist but to be an explorer of their experiences for the purposes of research. However, in order to provide a safe and supportive environment, therapeutic ideas remained relevant. Outlined by Rogers (1957), the core conditions of warmth, congruence and unconditional positive regard were central to my brief time with the research participants. Not engaging with these qualities may have inhibited the interview process and the richness of the data.

Once a participant had read the Participant Information Sheet and had agreed to take part in the research study, an interview time and day was arranged. Prior to this, participants were required to read, complete, and sign the Participant Consent Form (appendix 4). All forms were provided electronically (email) and required electronic signatures. Interviews were only facilitated once the information sheet and consent form were read and signed. To attend an interview, participants were sent a 'Zoom' link and password to access the virtual interview space. Prior to the main interview commencing, I attempted to put the participants at ease by engaging in small talk and exploring with them whether they understood or had any questions about the information sheet provided. I also sought verbal consent for their involvement with the study and checked that the consent form had been understood and signed. Once the participant confirmed they understood the purpose of the interview and were happy to continue, the audio recording function of 'Zoom' was activated. Participants were informed that interviews could last between forty five to sixty minutes. All ten interviews were between these time points.

3.6.3 The interview guide

Determined to be good practice, an interview schedule was developed for the semi-structured interviews (Rowley, 2012). The schedule would serve as a collection of questions that aimed to guide the interview process in an attempt to generate answers to the research questions. The questions were in a logical sequence, firstly exploring the students' expectations of the university socio-cultural environment before moving to explore their actual experiences. Additional prompting questions were a part of the interview schedule that were approved by the university ethics committee. These were to be used in order to explore a participants experiences in greater depth.

To develop the interview schedule used, the five stage framework set out by Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson and Kangasniemi (2016) was considered. Kallio et al (2016) stated that there are five helpful phases that can guide the development of a well-designed semi-structured interview schedule. Following these stages of development are said to enhance the trustworthiness and levels of rigour of the schedule (Kallio et al, 2016). The five phases are (Kallio et al, 2016. p. 2961):

1. *Identifying the prerequisites for using a semi-structured interview.*
2. *Retrieving and using previous knowledge.*
3. *Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide.*
4. *Pilot testing the interview guide.*
5. *Presenting the complete semi-structured guide.*

The interview schedule developed for this project engaged with these different stages and was supported by a research supervisor. A pilot interview with an undergraduate student was not completed, however the initial draft of the interview schedule was tested with the help of postgraduate research students who were able to give useful feedback for its further development.

3.6.4 Transcription

Transcription has been described as an interpretive process (Poland, 2016) and not one that is mechanical narration of a conversation (Davidson, 2009). Davidson (2009) indicated that transcription involves choices that a researcher may be influenced by their epistemological and ontological viewpoint. For example, a researcher with an interpretivist perspective views transcripts to be theoretical constructions that interpretations can be generated from. Brinkmann and Kvale (2020) and Rapley (2021) supported the above perspective, describing transcription as a translation from an oral to a written language where constructions along the way are partial, selective and involve a series of judgements.

I elected to transcribe the interviews of this project manually rather than using technology or outsourcing the transcribing process to another person. I believed it to be important to engage with the transcription process myself in order to become closer to the data, becoming more familiar with the experiences of the participants. Brinkmann and Kvale (2020) supported this approach stating that a researcher will become closer to the social and emotional aspects of the interview and would have begun the analysis process. Alongside this decision, Poland (2016) expressed the importance of transcripts being verbatim accounts of what occurred within an interview whilst recognising that they are written records within a much wealthier interaction between participant and researcher. Consequently, I focussed

upon providing verbatim accounts of the participants but I was aware of how my own beliefs, values and experiences could influence the transcription. In their paper, Nascimento and Steinbruch (2019) emphasised that the interview and transcription processes are interactional events between different parties yet the process of transcription involves a researcher with a subjective lens that means approaching transcription in a reflexive approach is important. Engaging with a research diary and seeking support from my research supervisor was helpful with regards to reflexively approaching transcription.

To further support approach I took to transcription, the guidance provided by Rapley (2021) was invaluable. Speakers were labelled clearly as “researcher and “participant”; line numbers were used; and paralinguistic features were noted. However, I agonised as to whether to embrace a naturalised or denaturalised approach to transcription. Nascimento and Steinbruch (2019) presented the idea that naturalised transcripts can generate conflicting interpretations because readers are not used to navigating their way through paralinguistic or other features of dialogue, such as slang and pauses. Ultimately, a transcript could become confusing. However, they also suggested that a naturalised transcript allows the interview to be in its purest form and demonstrates greater transparency. Nascimento and Steinbruch (2019) suggested that there is no best approach for transcription though. As a result, I initiated an approach that incorporated both approaches. In the most part, I embraced a naturalised technique although adopted a denaturalised approach on occasion that would support the analysis process, for example, by not always documenting every “um” or “errr” sound. An example of a transcribed interview can be found within the appendices (appendix 5).

3.7 Method of Data Analysis

3.7.1 Data analysis

Due to differing epistemological and pluralistic perspectives, qualitative research methods are said to not involve a single approach but a range of approaches, for example, grounded theory (GT), discourse analysis (DA) and thematic analysis (TA) (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Speziale, Streubert and Carpenter (2011) stated that as qualitative approaches have similar aims and considerable overlaps with their processes, a researcher

needs to be clear upon the reasons for engaging with any particular form of analysis and how their research questions can be appropriately addressed. With its inductive approach, this research project seeks to develop an understanding of the subjective experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying students. An interpretivist-constructivist paradigm has been embraced, supporting the decision to use reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as the method of data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019a).

3.7.2 Rationale for Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Fitting well with the data collection method of interviewing, TA is a widely used and distinct analytical method that has been growing in popularity over the last decade (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2022) described TA as a “method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose”. (p. 4). Clarke and Braun (2018) stated that their version of TA was developed to embrace a qualitative philosophy that embraced researcher subjectivity as a resource, recognised the importance of reflexivity and valued the situated and contextual nature of meaning.

Described as a method rather than a methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2022), TA is often said to be flexible in theoretical approaches and described as a family of approaches rather than one (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2021) describe three broad types of TA:

- Coding reliability approaches.
- Codebook approaches
- Reflexive approaches

This research project has used a reflexive TA approach to data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe reflexivity as a process of critical reflection as a researcher, research process and practice. Braun and Clarke (2022) go on to describe reflexive TA as: “reflexive TA captures approaches fully embedded within the values of a qualitative paradigm, which

then inform research practice”. (p. 5). In 2019, Braun and Clarke (2019) described reflexive TA as follows:

“Reflexive TA needs to be implemented with theoretical knowingness and transparency; the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA; and these are consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

As reflexive TA is an analytical method that fits well with the exploration of human experiences whilst flexible to the theory it can be alligned to, reflexive TA was determined to be an appropriate method of data anlysis for this study. As well as theoretical flexibility, there are a number of other advantages to reflexive TA outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) below.

Table 4 – Advantages of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006. p. 97).

Advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and interpretation of the data can be broad. • Can highlight similarities and differences across the data set. • Can generate unanticipated insights. • Allows social as well as psychological interpretation of data. • Relatively easy and quick method to use, often accessible and easily understood by the general population.

Braun and Clarke (2006) have stated a number of disadvantages to the approach. For example, they stated that broad interpretations or takeaways from the data can lead to researcher feeling paralysed, not knowing which areas of their data to focus upon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Other disadvantages can be found in the table below.

Table 5 – Disadvantages of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006. p. 97)

Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited interpretative power if not used within an existing theoretical framework. • Inability to retain a sense of continuity and contradiction through a data set which could be revealing. • Making claims about findings from data is difficult.

Although there are disadvantages to reflexive TA, this method of analysis is ideal given the ontological, epistemological and methodological perspective of this research study. This approach allowed the subjective experiences of young people to determine the themes of their experiences. Using a different analytical approach, such as GT, would not have been suitable as this research project is not seeking to extract or create a theory from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.7.3 Approach to reflexive thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) set out six phases to the analytic process. In order to provide a clear and rigorous approach to data analysis, these six phases were followed to generate the themes and ultimately the findings of this research project. By using these phases as a guide, they enhance the transparency of the analysis process and also act as a guide to the reflexive process of the researcher. Braun and Clarke (2022) outlined the six phases as follows:

- Phase one: Data set familiarisation.
- Phase two: Data coding.
- Phase three: Initial theme generation.
- Phase four: Theme development and review.
- Phase five: Theme refining, defining and naming.
- Phase six: Writing up.

3.7.4 Phase one: Data set familiarisation

Becoming familiar with the data set was the first step of the analysis of the data. This immersion into the data began at the interview stage and was supported by reflective notes taken at the time of and shortly after the interview. To enhance this familiarisation with the data, I personally wrote the interview transcripts and read them a number of times whilst listening to the audio. Further re-reads and the taking of reflective notes helped me to be close to the data set before the formal process of coding had begun.

I found it helpful to listen to the audio recordings and read the transcripts more than once. Not only did this help to become more intimate with the data, it allowed me to become habituated to the sound of my voice and how I may ask questions. It is especially unusual to hear oneself and at times I felt awkward, however the more I engaged with the data, the more focussed and familiar I became with the data.

3.7.5 Phase two: Data coding

Following becoming more familiar with the dataset, Braun and Clarke (2022) state that the next phase of analysis is that of data coding. To do this, I systematically went through each transcript (and the entire data set), line by line, in an effort to discover anything that was (or could be) interesting and relevant to the answering of the research questions. Data-items were reviewed in order to add, check or change codes. Due to the large amount of data and the codes that were developed, the NVivo software was used to help organise data enabling a more efficient process.

When I reached phase two of the analysis, I was feeling anxious as I did not feel like I fully understood what a code is, how many I should have and how long they should be. The idea of coding became scary and so it was Braun and Clarke's (2022) text that helped make this phase much less anxiety provoking. Braun and Clark (2022) described a code as "an output of the coding process; an analytically interesting idea, concept or meaning associated with particular segments of data; often refined during the coding process" (Braun & Clarke,

2022, p. 53). Additionally, a coding label is described as “a succinct phrase attached to a segment of data, as a shorthand tag for a code” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 53).

A review of Braun and Clarke’s (2022) book supported me to understand that the coding process involves the reading of the data and noticing meaning that is relevant to the research aims and questions. There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to how long or how many codes there should be, however Braun and Clarke (2022) advise that there are three important principles to consider when identifying a code label:

1. A code label should summarise the meaning that has been identified within the data and reduce any mess within the data.
2. A code label should not be too broad, ensuring that the meaning that has been identified is apparent.
3. A code label often contains some indicator of the interpretative stance of the data.

(Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 60).

Additionally, I learned from Braun and Clarke (2022) that coding is an organic and evolving process, that involves review and constant attention. An understanding that there are different types of code, semantic and latent, was helpful for this evolution process. Braun and Clarke (2002) defined semantic codes as “explicitly expressed meaning” whilst describing latent codes as “deeper, more implicit or conceptual level of meaning, sometimes quite abstracted from the obvious content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57 – 58).

The phase of this analysis was anxiety provoking and was difficult to keep track of the differing codes generated, however it was made considerably more manageable to engage with this phase with the support of the text mentioned above.

3.7.6 Phase three: Initial theme generation

Following the coding process, the next phase involves engaging with codes in the search for similarity of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The aim of this phase was to bring

codes together in the form of a cluster and begin to identify developing patterns and meanings. An example of this is presented in appendix 6. Developing the initial clusters and tentative themes allowed me to begin reflecting upon high level themes. Braun and Clarke (2022) stated that an important part of this phase is to explore cluster patterns that stretch across the dataset, not just within one data item.

This stage of the analysis did seem overwhelming at first. I was confronted with a great many codes and feeling a little unsure as to how to progress. Merging similar codes and excluding those irrelevant to the research question was an important initial step once familiar with the coding labels. With the support of the Braun and Clarke (2022) text, I manage to cluster codes and begin to identify patterns of meaning. Following the clustering of codes, I found myself with thirteen initial themes which would go on to be refined.

3.7.7 Phase four: Theme development and review

Following the initial generation of tentative themes, phase four aimed to provide an initial check on the process conducted in phase three (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To do this, I re-engaged with the coded extracts and the entire data set by reading and reviewing the noted clusterings and patterns. Braun and Clarke (2022) stated that the purpose of doing this is to provide a validity check upon the analysis process up until this point.

When developing and reviewing tentative themes, it was helpful to engage with my research supervisor on a number of occasions. Themes were developed over the course of a number of conversations with my research supervisor as I was encountering a number of issues with the process. For example, I recall having theme descriptions which contradicted or opposed each other as well as having a large amount of potential themes which were struggling to tell the story of the data.

3.7.8 Phase five: Theme refining, defining and naming

Said to blend into phase six due to the writing process, phase five involves the greater development of themes and analytical refinement (Braun & Clarke 2022). This was the stage which led to greater precision and the naming of the themes. As advised by Braun and Clarke (2022), this process aided the development of a structure and flow to the analysis that enabled the telling of the story found in the next chapter. The refined themes with codes are presented in appendix 7.

From phase three to five, tentative themes were refined to a final six. Engaging with my research supervisor on a regular basis was incredibly important to support me to refine, define and name the final themes. Supervision conversations helped me to generate how to appropriately label the themes that tell a story of the participants' experiences in an honest and human manner.

3.7.9 Phase six: Writing up

Braun and Clarke (2022) describe the writing up phase as not an add on to the analysis but a phase that is a key component of it. They assert that the writing is embedded with the analysis process and it is where the story is brought together in an attempt to answer the research questions.

I enjoyed the write up phase as I felt as though I was even closer to the experiences of the participants. After a long time of engaging with this research project, bringing their stories together was an honour as I felt like I was finally able to clearly document the voices of LGBTQ+ undergraduate students.

3.8 Trustworthiness

For many decades, there have been questions as to how to measure the trustworthiness of qualitative research as well as questions as to whether this form of research could be considered in the same light as quantitative approaches (Rolfe, 2006). Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017) stated that as the use and the value of qualitative research

has grown, greater efforts have been made to conduct rigorous research that have led to meaningful and trustworthy results. Connelley (2016) defined trustworthiness in qualitative research as: “trustworthiness or rigor of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study” (Connelley, 2014, p. 435).

In order to reach a point of meaningful and trustworthy research, it is argued that Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of trustworthy could be followed (Connelley, 2016; Nowell et al, 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that trustworthiness of the research can be developed by establishing: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability. . I have chosen to be guided by the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) given that they have been consistently been referenced through the literature I have engaged with, indicating the regard held of them in this field of study. Using the criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I will set out how I have ensured rigour and trustworthiness of the findings from this research. Table 6 demonstrates the steps I have taken to achieve this in line with the criteria.

Table 6 – Trustworthiness criteria and actions

Criteria	Actions taken
Credibility	As well as the literature, I have engaged with the data for a significant amount of time. I have also utilised time with peers and with my supervisor to debrief and reflect upon the analysis and findings.
Transferability	The methodology and analysis process has been described in detail.
Dependability	The analysis process has been clearly outlined and followed rigorously. A reflexive diary has been used to document the process and to further encourage the reflexive approach to the analysis.
Confirmability	I have been able to demonstrate that I have adhered to the first three criteria and that the findings are derived from the data collected. Throughout the writing process, I have also shared the rationale and justified why decisions have been made during this research study.

In order to bolster the trustworthiness of this research, I was also guided by the quality criteria for reflexive thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2022). The fifteen point criteria outlining good reflexive TA is as follows:

1. The data has been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail and checked for accuracy.
2. Each data item has been given thorough and repeated attention.
3. The coding process has been thorough and comprehensive, themes being developed from a number of examples.
4. Relevant data for each theme has been clustered.
5. Themes have been checked against coded data / original data set.
6. Themes are coherent and distinctive.
7. Data has been analysed and interpreted rather than summarised or described.
8. Analytical claims match with the data.
9. Analysis addresses the research questions, telling a convincing and well organised story.
10. There is an appropriate balance of analytical narrative and data evidence.
11. Enough time has been allocated to adequately engage with all phases of the analysis.
12. Thematic analysis, theoretical positions and assumptions are clearly presented in the written report.
13. The described research method and analysis are consistent.
14. The language and concepts discussed in the report are consistent with the ontological and epistemological position of the analysis.
15. The research is active in the research process and not relying upon ideas or knowledge to emerge.

(Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 269)

3.9 Ethical Issues

Research ethics guide the norms of conduct or the moral principles that are important for all researchers to follow. These principles promote the need to engage with all those involved with a research project in a way that is respectful, dignified, and transparent. Ethical guidelines can provide a framework of responsibility and accountability, safeguarding not only participants but the knowledge that may be discovered.

Following familiarising myself with the ethics procedures of The University of Manchester, I sought and gained ethical approval for the research project (appendix 8). Ethical approval was granted by The University of Manchester's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) prior to the search for and recruitment of participants. The standards and ethical framework as detailed by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2016), including the specific guidance relating to students and education providers has also been considered when conducting this research project (HCPC, 2016). Additionally, the 'Code of Human Research Ethics' guidance as outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014) and the 'Code of Ethics and Conduct' guidelines (BPS, 2018) have been engaged with in order to provide an appropriate ethical framework. I believed it to be important to consider these guidelines given the research project centred around young people and their experiences of what is generally accepted as a difficult time in the lives of many.

Ethics guidelines provide protection and support for all participants through the research process. One such way of doing this is by providing any potential participant with detailed information about a research project that an informed decision can be made as to whether be involved with a project. Sin (2016) stated that the securing of informed consent was important for all researchers to do in order to protect and safeguard the welfare of all participants. As a result of this, all potential and actual participants for this study were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (appendix 3) which gave a detailed account of what the research project entailed. The aim of this was to enable participants to make an informed decision as to whether they would like to be involved in the project. If participants indicated they wanted to engage with the research project, a Participant Consent Form (appendix 4) was provided. A signed and returned consent form would indicate the participant understood what their involvement with the study would entail and that they consented to be involved. Consent was sought in a written format as well as verbal. Consent forms were provided and signed prior to research interviews taking place. Whilst additional verbal consent to be involved with the project was sought prior to an interview starting. This

was particularly important given interviews were being recorded. Participants were made aware via the documentation as well as verbally that they could withdraw from the research project at any time prior to the transcribing of their interview.

In the event of any participant becoming distressed during the research interview, a Distress Management Protocol (appendix 9) would have been followed. This protocol was not used during the research but was developed as a precaution due to the potential sensitive nature of topics being explored. Draucker, Martsof, and Poole (2009) stated that if there is a risk of a participant becoming emotionally distressed, then it is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to be prepared and identify this risk as well as reducing any distress that may be experienced. They stated that the development of a distress management protocol for a research project would therefore be important to support vulnerable participants (Draucker et al., 2009).

In order to protect the identity and information provided by a participant, it was imperative to adhere to high standards in relation to standards of confidentiality and data management. A Data Management Plan (appendix 10) was developed and approved by UREC. This plan guided how information, such as audio recordings, consent forms and transcripts, were to be managed.

3.10 Reflexivity

Atkins and Murphy (1993) described reflection as an intellectual and affective process whereby any individual may explore their experiences in the quest for new understanding, knowledge, and appreciations. Alongside the process of reflexivity, Braun and Clarke (2019) described reflection as an important tool for a researchers who are engaging with qualitative research methods. Throughout the research process, I have been documenting my reflections at the different stages of the project. Mostly, this is to be transparent about my engagement with the data being collected and to enhance the trustworthiness of the process as a whole.

As a person who identifies within the LGBTQ+ community and having had numerous years of being a student, I anticipated that I may be affected in some way by the research

interviews. As I anticipated a reaction to the data being collected, I was acutely aware of how this reaction may be observed by a participant. As a result, I believe I was fairly wary of this issue when data was being collected, often writing in my reflexive journal that I was nervous before the start of an interview. I believe that I conducted the interviews in a professional way and in a way that followed the process as outlined to gain ethical approval. I did notice at times that I was feeling a sense of excitement and passion about the information that was being shared. At times, this led me to want to drift into other areas of conversation and away from the interview schedule. Thankfully, I was able to be aware of this issue and by acknowledging the urge to drift, it aided me to return to the planned schedule. I believe at times there were points where my questions were a little leading or there could have been an opportunity for more open sub-questions, however I learned from such reflections and attempted to develop my interview style as time went on.

I noticed that for some of the interviews, I felt a great deal of sadness and flickers of hopelessness. It was difficult to hear about hate crimes that young people continue to face, difficulties with “coming out” and subtle microaggressions that have huge consequences. I recognised that I was relating to some of the content of the interview and I am acutely aware as to how this could influence data analysis. At times, I also felt a little detached from the interview, perhaps as a way to avoid engaging emotionally with the difficult subject matter. The acknowledgement of these experiences is important, particularly for when undertaking the analysis of data.

The analysis of the data was difficult for many reasons but it was also exciting too. When diving into the data, I was acutely aware of how my interpretation of myself, others and the world could influence the coding process. I was feeling a little fearful that I would generate codes and themes that did not reflect the experiences of the participants. Some reassurance was that I knew I had engaged with the quality criteria set out by Braun and Clarke (2022), however research supervision seemed even more helpful. When fearing I would misrepresent the experiences of students, my supervisor helped remind me that the knowledge being generated is co-constructed. Recognising and accepting that it was okay for some of my own experiences to be part of the construction of knowledge was important to the analysis process. It was incredibly useful to discuss how I was approaching the analysis of the data with a person who was a little more removed from the data. Alongside helpful advice, my supervisor asked questions that helped me to think about how I engaged with the data. A helpful piece of advice

was to step away from the data for a short while but not for a length of time that meant one lost the rhythm of analysing data. Sometimes I felt like I was drowning in code labels so taking a short break, focussing upon another area of the thesis, was helpful to feel refreshed and motivated to look at the data with a relative fresh eye.

3.11 Chapter Summary

The aim of this chapter was to provide an explanation of the philosophical underpinnings, the design and methodology of this research project. As discussed, the ontological and epistemological positions of constructivism and interpretivism respectively informed the qualitative approach to the research topic. I explored in this chapter what led to the decision to engage with qualitative research methods and explored in depth the data collection strategy and method of analysis. I also outline in this chapter the frameworks used to establish rigour and trustworthiness in the data. At the end of this chapter, I have provided a summary of the ethical guidelines followed throughout the research process and offer my own reflections upon my own experiences as a researcher.

Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

Following engaging with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were developed that will be presented in this chapter. The analysis was conducted in order to support answering the following questions:

1. What expectations did first year undergraduates have of the university socio-cultural environment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have first year undergraduates experienced the university socio-cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Given the ontological and epistemological approach that I have taken to this research (constructivist and interpretivist), I have been able to explore the subjective experiences of participants, attempting to understand their experiences within their own realities. Following the generation of themes, this chapter aims to tell the story of the participants' expectations and experiences of the socio-cultural environment of university life. I acknowledge that this story will be co-constructed between researcher and participants as it is not fully possible to avoid influencing knowledge generation as a researcher. To demonstrate transparency and support the trustworthiness of the analysis, extracts of the raw data will be presented in this chapter to illustrate the themes generated. Additional extracts of raw data can also be found within appendix 11. These have been included within the appendices in order to further display how student experiences influenced my approach to the data analysis.

Six themes were identified following the analysis of the interview data. These themes are presented in the table below and will be explored further with quotes to illustrate their different dimensions.

Table 7 – Themes from analysis

Themes
High expectations of university life
Perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences
Pandemic encouraging a sense of community and bonding
Disappointment, anger and worsening of wellbeing
Difficulties accessing formal support and other approaches to support wellbeing
Importance of LGBTQ+ community and spaces

4.2 High expectations of university life

This theme exemplifies the high expectations that students had of the socio-cultural environment of university life. As many of the students explained, a great many of these expectations were not met or were not met to the extent to which they thought prior to attending university. Participants seemingly had high expectations of the university socio-cultural environment, hoping that university would provide an exciting opportunity to meet new people, to be more independent, mix with diverse and liberal people and be a place to support the development of the social self.

For many of the participants, if not all, the prospect of attending university was an exciting experience. As stated by James, there were a number of reasons for this excitement.

“I was expecting to find really exciting new things from all perspectives. From like, social perspectives, from like academic perspectives”.

(James)

Adam also alluded to the excitement fuelled by his expectations of the socio-cultural environment of university life.

“I think I was pretty excited because going from where I have previously lived to where I now live, was like a big step up”.

(Adam)

Meeting new people and developing relationships came across as incredibly important to many of the participants. For many, it seemed like a new beginning following leaving of school or college into an environment where they may have the opportunity to develop life-long friendships. This appears to be reflected by Adam’s use of the term “step up”. For Adam, the prospect of moving away from a small town and meeting lots of different people from different backgrounds and with different interests was an exciting opportunity for him. Nancy and Ellie also spoke of their excitement about meeting new people and perhaps reflect Adam’s sentiment of university leading to a socio-cultural “step up”.

“I didn’t think I would spend much time in halls, so I wasn’t very bothered by where I was living. And I thought I would find a lot more people like minded. Moving to a big city, from being from a smaller area, it’s like... it is exciting because you get to see a lot more people like you rather than the same people you have known since you were very small. And I thought I’d make most of my friends in classes. Yeah”.

(Nancy)

“None of my friends went to the same city as me, so I was quite excited just to meet new people because I have always done things where I get to meet new people”.

(Ellie)

It was hoped by some participants that one of the ways to meet new people would be through engaging with student union societies. This was an exciting prospect and played a role in creating the expectation of a busy university life, a life that would be engaging with constant social and cultural experiences.

“Well, I expected to be going out a lot, always being busy I guess. Especially because I was really excited to join societies. Like I had a full list of ones that I wanted to go ask questions about and possibly join. So, I was just kind of expecting life to be really bustling and busy and like, erm, always meeting new people. Yeah. It was kind of exciting as well”.

(Ashford)

Researcher: “And, so, thinking pre-university right now, what were your expectations of the socio-cultural environment of University prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic?”

Participant: “Erm, just that it would be really social and I would be meeting people all the time. I’d constantly be, sort of, around people and I’d never really be at home”.

(Nancy)

However, as well as engaging with societies, it was clear from many of the students that they hoped to be meeting new people by attending parties and enjoying what the city nightlife had to offer. This is somewhat expected. As Jake’s comments state, the life of a student is perhaps often considered to be a life of partying and socialising in part. Whether this be through engaging with university or union organised events or students exploring what their university city has to offer. From the interviews, I understood the importance of being able to “party” and socialise as significant moments that allow students to develop connections with others and to have life experiences that they may have not had before. It was not just a case of partying for the sake of partying it seemed.

“I would definitely say that there is an expectation of University as sort of a place for partying, for being a lot more social and that was definitely something that I haven’t really experienced before. So, I was looking forward to it quite a lot”.

(Jake)

As well as excitement for socialising and future opportunities that attending university may bring, some participants had the expectation that meeting new people would support the process of personal development. This will be explored further later in the chapter but James captures this expectation well.

“New opportunities to meet new people and sort of have a chance to discover myself. And, at the same time, have like a chance to like learn about the subject that I am currently doing. And find like volunteering and job opportunities for like undergraduate students”.

(James)

Although there was a great deal of excitement for meeting new people, there were also understandable nerves about the social environment of university as well.

“Well prior to the pandemic, I was mainly excited but I was also really nervous because I used to be a lot more introverted than I am now. So, I was kind of scared about how I would go about making friends. Not fitting in but just having a good experience really. Yeah, I was mainly excited but also very nervous”.

(Ashford)

From my analysis, it would seem that an element of this excitement was fuelled by a belief or hope that university would be a place overwhelmed by young, liberal, open minded and like-minded people.

“Obviously, being at university with lots of young people and lots of, mostly open minded people, I thought that would be like a really nice, sort of, fresh start. So, I was really looking forward to it”.

(Adam)

“I expected people to be more accepting. More tolerant. I expected to form friendships with people within the community or people from different cultures”.

(Sapphire)

It seemed that many of the participants were expecting and looking forward to such an environment, particularly as they all identify within the LGBTQ+ community. A socio-cultural environment that is liberal and open-minded provides a great deal of comfort and safety from judgement for a community that has historically been discriminated against and persecuted. Connecting with another person within this community was clearly important for students to feel as though others understand what it is like to be part of a minoritised group. This shared understanding and connection is valuable.

“Well, I think people wouldn’t judge you as much for being LGBT at Uni. Compared to 6th form, college, high school. I think everyone is just more open to the idea that people are not just straight. So that was kind of expectation. Obviously it is just because I have an older brother who went to Uni and he told me that there are quite of lot of LGBT people, like, compared to when you’re in 6th form”.

(Michael)

“I am a member of the LGBT community and I want to find people who have that in common with me and I want to find people who already have that kind of understanding of what it is like to be a member of the LGBT community because it’s an intrinsic part of who I am”.

(Mary)

As well as the hope of a liberal and open-minded environment that would be accepting of LGBTQ+ people, it seemed participants expected to be able to engage with the LGBTQ+ culture and community within their university city, developing relationships with fellow LGBTQ+ identifying students. Later in the chapter, we will learn that this was made incredibly difficult to do as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I was really excited because, obviously, erm, going to my Uni has, it has like a gay village and stuff in that city”.

(Ellie)

“Because there is an LGBT society and things like that. So that was kind of my expectation...that I would be involved in the community more”.

(Mary)

“Oh I, it was basically something that I was really looking forward to. It was something that...that like I knew it was...a new environment of safety. And I was sometimes, just like, sit and think about it. Sit and think about how happy I would be around people who are like LGBTQ+. And think about how free I will be to express myself. So yeah, I was really expecting a really accepting environment. I was expecting a really safe environment basically”.

(James)

It would seem that many participants were also looking forward to the freedom and independence that the university socio-cultural environment brings. For nearly all of the participants, going to university would be the first opportunity living away from their hometowns and as a result, participants felt this freedom would generate many opportunities. Anne described university environment as being a form of escapism for her.

“I think for me, it’s, erm, because I have always wanted to go to University, so it’s something I have always wanted to do. And it is my escapism. It is somewhere where I can switch off from my life and just learn about what I want to learn about.”

(Anne)

Whilst Anne wanted to embrace the freedom to learn, others were excited for the opportunity and freedom to meet more diverse groups of people including more people from the LGBTQ+ community. It appeared important for some of the students to be able to have this opportunity in order to support personal identity development and to create connections with people that they may resonate the most with.

“So, like, obviously, because of moving to a different place. A much bigger place from where I came from, its allowed me to meet more and more diverse people, especially coming from a more conservative area to a more, much more liberal area. It’s been very nice to interact with more and more queer people. So, like I’ve explored the way I present myself, the way I dress and what that means to me”.

(Adam)

Ashford and James expressed their excitement for the freedom that they believed university could provide. Through the interview process, participants seemed to really value the possibility that they could have greater control over their life choices.

“I was definitely excited for the independence that comes with the...so like living with people my own age. Getting to cook for myself was a big thing for some reason. It

allowed me to become vegetarian as well which is quite cool. It was mainly the independence and then also the opportunities that university can provide, so like societies and extracurricular. As well as obviously the degree”.

(Ashford)

“My thoughts about being at university, I just, erm, I was just extremely excited about having that sort of freedom...back at home where I was living with my parents, I couldn’t really do much without them knowing. Basically, I was in a bit of a controlling environment. I just wanted to...I very much want to have my own freedom and be in an environment where they, like, they couldn’t know what I did”.

(James)

However, as it became more apparent that the pandemic would be persisting for much longer, it was clear that James’ expectations (and the expectations of other participants) were beginning to change. This of course created a great deal of sadness, disappointment, and a feeling that all the social and cultural experiences that had been hoped for would be lost.

“It was quite sad to realise to be honest because, you know, seeing how the pandemic progress...I sort of started to become more pessimistic about what university would be like. And I just knew that I very much wanted to get away from home but seeing that...I didn’t have much of a chance to anymore. It was really...it was really depressing so to say”.

(James)

From the interview data, it is apparent that participants did have many expectations of the socio-cultural environment that university life may provide for them. As we will explore through this chapter, the actual experiences of students suggest that some of these expectations may have been high (for a variety of reason) given the COVID-19 situation. In part, Jake felt that his perspective and expectations had been influenced by the media.

“I definitely think all of my expectations of being queer and of being a student, they’re through movies and TV shows. Things that I have not personally engaged with myself. So, the way that I was expecting life to be is obviously very different to fiction. I think there is really unhealthy depictions of how it’s going to be when you can’t sort of ground yourself in realistic expectations. There’s no, sort of, healthy realistic depictions of...this is what it is going to be like as a queer adult in your age range”.

(Jake)

4.3 Perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences

This theme recognises the loss of social and cultural experiences that participants perceived that they had. The theme also recognises the changes and perhaps losses in learning experiences that ultimately influenced the social and cultural environment of university life. Many participants felt like they had lost out on the learning, social and cultural experiences that they had expected. Some participants spoke of a sense of disappointment, feeling let down by the situation and sadness. There appeared to be a sense of loss for something that they were not able to obtain.

“First year is supposed to be like the best year. I am in second year now. But it just felt, very like, a bit let down because I think our year group have suffered a lot over the few years. First GCSE’s, then A-Level’s cancelled and uni is online. It was just a lot going on. So, I feel like it...I don’t know what the word is to use. It was just quite sad to know that would be our first year experience”.

(Sapphire)

“I wasn’t really seeing a person or meeting a person. I was just texting or getting involved in like a group chat. So that was kind of the experience that I had”.

“I really wanted to be able to connect and develop with other people and that’s been really upsetting because I have wanted that connection and it has just been very lonely. Nothing new. No new experiences that I wanted to have. It is really disappointing”.

(Mary)

Anne appears to describe a void in her socio-cultural experiences of university life. She spoke of expectation of being able to engage with social and cultural experience, even online, however this did not materialise. As a consequence, the participant found university life a struggle fuelled by a sense of feeling isolated from social and cultural connections. Due to this, it would be understandable if Anne’s psychological well-being were to be affected.

“Erm, obviously the social side wasn’t that good. It was like, everything is on Zoom. Cultural...the same. There weren’t many things on Zoom, like the societies. There wasn’t much to do. Not many workshops or things to get involved with”.

“It has been a struggle. I have felt really isolated”.

(Anne)

As a result of realising that the expected social and cultural experiences would not materialise, it led to some participants attempting to focus upon their studies rather than socio-cultural experiences. Jake mentioned how a switch was flicked into his mind that motivated him to focus upon his studies rather than caring for “coming of age” experiences. Jake appears to make the link between social, cultural, and learning experiences with personal growth. The perceived loss of these experiences would perhaps then be to the detriment of this growth.

“I would absolutely say that I changed my expectations. I think that COVID as a whole, sort of, turned that switch off for me. Like, I was pretty much...I have always been a very academic person, so it sort of flicked that switch in my head to make me

focus on...I am only going here for the grades, not sort of caring about any of coming of age side of that. I was primarily focussed upon, I guess it's happened now. I just need to do this".

(Jake)

Mary also spoke of feeling isolated and not feeling like she had moved forward in her life. She said this was in part due to not being able to make the connections she wanted, visit the places she wanted to see and explore the LGBTQ+ community that is a big part of her university city (and her identity).

"There was no way that I could go out and explore the city. I couldn't go to these different places that I wanted to go to. I couldn't meet new people really in the way that I wanted to and develop that kind of connection and friendship that I wanted to develop with people. It was all very, kind of, superficial and very much...yeah...just not deep at all. Yeah. That was really difficult".

(Mary)

The isolation, sadness and feeling of missing out on social and cultural experiences was shared by Michael and Nancy also. Nancy felt like she was not able to immerse herself within the culture(s) of university life, stating that there was an absence of any expected experience.

"So, I didn't meet as many people as I wanted to. Yeah, it was kind of annoying because I had this idea that I would meet loads of different people but it just didn't happen. Yeah. I feel like I kind of missed out in a way on good opportunities to make some good friends...But it also made me feel very sad and isolated".

(Michael)

“I wasn’t part of, sort of, university culture, whatever people say it is like to experience. There was just no experience. There was nothing”.

(Nancy)

Ashton felt the situation he found himself was “dark” and had hoped that there would have been greater structure in his day during the difficult period. However, there was not and this would have appeared to have influenced his social and cultural interactions.

“Yeah, it was pretty dark really. I just barely left my room. Even all my lectures were online so it was kind of like, you know, there wasn’t much structure to my life. I was expecting a lot more structure because it’s an education institution so you’d think it would have a routine, plan for you. But it was more unplanned I guess”.

(Ashton)

Nancy mentioned how she had to rely on making friends online in order to develop connections with others. She had expected to be embracing the differing cultures of campus life and to socialise, however this was not possible. The COVID-19 restrictions meant that students needed to adapt to develop their relationships. Like others, the lack of social and cultural experiences affected Nancy’s well-being. From reading Nancy’s words, the hate and despair she was encountering as a result of this difficult time in her life is almost palpable. Nancy describes feeling awful and returned to her hometown more than expected due to the toll the situation appeared to be having upon her well-being. Returning home seemed to be a strategy that was providing comfort for this participant.

“I managed to make friends outside of my flat in my halls. Which felt a lot more social but it was due to groups chat rather than campus life that meant that happened. I didn’t sort of meet them in uni and make friends with them, it was all due to online. uni was really, whenever I did go to campus on a walk because you’re not allowed to go to study, it was just, there was no culture. It was so quiet, comparing to how it is now, it was just...it didn’t / wasn’t running. Like uni wasn’t open”.

“There is no experience that everyone talks about. It was me in a room that I hated. That was too small. All day. Every day”.

“I went home more than I thought I would and I live quite far away. I think I went home 4 or 5 times last year, a few times just because I really needed to because I just felt awful being at Uni because nothing was going right”.

(Nancy)

Some participants attempted to join online groups in an attempt to immerse themselves into social and cultural experiences.

“I just went out of my way to find online groups that were for things that interested me. So, I could talk to people on Zoom. Yeah”.

(James)

One participant felt a great deal of pressure to develop connections with those he was living with as he would not have been able to meet many others.

“Everyone was living with people they’ve never met before and it was sort of trying to establish these friendships really quickly so that you didn’t feel isolated or whatever. And then, sort of, I suppose peer pressure to drink and to somewhat do drugs (not on a large scale), this is sort of isolated to campus living I would say”.

(Adam)

However, for one participant, she had to live at home for her first year and as a result felt isolated. Due to the pandemic, she found it difficult to develop friendships with others

and suggested that it may have been easier for to do so if she was living in a halls of residence.

“Because I am living at home, you just kind of feel very isolated because everyone is out there making friends within their halls and everything. And you’re just stuck at home doing Uni work. Not the best thing”.

(Sapphire)

Mary had a similar experience. She found it difficult to live off campus and not be able to make social connections within a halls of residence. It was of course difficult to develop relationships elsewhere due to a lack of social and cultural events being organised (including online).

“I lived off campus throughout the entirety of my first year and I still do. That was very isolating because I couldn’t really interact with new people properly”.

(Mary)

It is clear that many of the participants were feeling a sense of loss. That they had lost the experiences that they were hoping for. Some participants did have hope that the situation would change and all would not be lost.

“Erm, I knew it would effect it but, I mean because they kept saying “oh it will only be so many months and then it will all be okay and then we will get back to normal life”. So, you live in the hope that it’s not going to be that long and it was like...obviously...we did Zoom lectures. For the few months, well they’re okay. I can deal with them for as long as they are not long-term. So, I was sort of getting around the fact that it was not going to be a long time and then obviously, it was a long time”.

(Anne)

Some participants spoke of how their expected romantic relationships were interrupted by the consequences of the pandemic. Adam suggested that finding a romantic partner is much more difficult for a person from the LGBTQ+ community due to the majority of people being heterosexual.

“I think I was expecting to be able to...I don’t know if this is relevant at all but I was sort of expecting to be able to undergo more romantic and sexual endeavours than I did...the majority of people being straight, it’s much safer and the chances of rejection are much lower so I think it is just important to recognise that relationships for queer people aren’t as easy”.

(Adam)

Another participant found it a great concern that she was not able to begin romantic relationships during her first year. Missing out on this experience of course leads to the loss of potential social and cultural experiences too.

“Honestly, it’s kind of...the expectation that I always kind of had coming into uni, is that you find the person that you’ll spend the rest of your life with in a way. And I realised when the first year happened and I wasn’t meeting people, that really had an effect of me”.

(Mary)

However, as the academic year progressed and restrictions eventually eased, some participants were able to engage with socio-cultural experiences. For example, Ashford spoke of how he was eventually able to mix with others in his building and begin to develop relationships with them. Although the experience was different to what he expected, this experience perhaps demonstrates the fluidity and unpredictability of the situations participants found themselves in.

“So, the by the end when I actually got to talk to people, you know, meet people I’d been living with in the same building for almost a year, that was quite cool. And then restaurants started to open up again so that was good. It still wasn’t what I expected pre-pandemic but compared to what it has been like in the previous months, it was like the best thing that could have happened. Other than that, my expectations weren’t really met no”.

(Ashford)

Many students felt like they had lost out from the experience of remote learning which they identified would have an impact upon their social and cultural experiences. Remote learning meant that participants were not visiting campus, engaging with in person peer support nor able to meet new people. As a result, some participants believed that remote learning was inferior to in person teaching. Please see appendix 11 for additional quotes.

“I just think remote learning doesn’t provide the same level of education as physical lectures would. Like, the ability to talk to lecturers, the ability to speak to people, the ability to hear what the lecturers have got to say in person...is always just better”.

(Sapphire)

“I feel like my achievements are not at the same level of prestige I suppose because the learning wasn’t the quality that it has been in the past arguably”.

(Jake)

Sapphire went on to explain further why she believes in person learning is more superior and how remote learning can influence her education. Sapphire appeared to struggle with remote learning as it did not provide the ability to develop connections with others, peer support nor efficient academic support.

“I think just the social aspect of lectures possibly. Just because you get to see everybody in your course, within the lecture theatres. Also, other people can provide peer support...like if you don't understand something you can speak to the person next to you. You could say explain this to me or do you know what this actually means. Whereas it was you were in front of a computer screen, it is all on yourself. If you don't understand, you'll have to email your lecturer or whatever. Or put it on the discussion board when you have a million other things to do”.

(Sapphire)

Other participants commented upon how remote learning has been in a challenge on a number of fronts. He spoke of feeling lost with part of his degree and with not having connections with people on the course, he was feeling isolated and less motivated to engage with learning.

“I think it just, because for one half of my degree I am definitely a bit more lost. And that's where I don't have friends. I think it sort of makes me feel more isolated within that part of my degree. And those modules I do find harder and less interesting. And perhaps if I had friends with whom I could discuss or work together with, I think maybe I would have been a bit more motivated to study those harder I suppose”.

(Adam)

Adam went on to state that he felt remote learning stopped the development of a community of people which otherwise would have developed with in person teaching.

“So obviously, if I had been going to in person classes I would have been able to meet those people and it would have been a lot more, sort of, we would have been more of a community I guess. If that makes sense”.

(Adam)

Nancy expressed her anger at remote learning and the university. She highlighted that she did not think the way of learning was helpful for her mental health, learning and social experiences.

“I really hated it. I still have it now. I am still not on campus and I really, really hate it. It feels like you are watching YouTube videos of people you are never going to meet. And you can’t sort of be watching and then ask the person next to you if they know what’s going on or speak to anyone across the room. You can’t do that; you have to watch a 2 hour long YouTube video that they probably recorded last year. I really hate it. I think it is an awful way to learn and I think it’s a huge cop out for the Uni. I really don’t think anybody benefits from staring at screen in their room for 6 hours a day. Socially or mentally”.

This experience seems similar to other participants. Students mentioned how they felt the quality of the learning provided was not satisfactory. There was a feeling that the information could have been gathered elsewhere and that they were not getting value for money. These experiences are important to note within this research project because a restricted socio-cultural environment was fuelling this situation. As a consequence, student engagement and well-being appear to be affected which then may influence the socio-cultural environment that a student may have.

“It was all pre-recorded and it was, like, just, you know, a lecturer going through a PowerPoint but on a computer. So, it was just like watching a YouTube video. I feel like I could have got a lot of the same information from watching a YouTube video. Which is not what I am paying over nine grand a year for. So, I was really disappointed with the quality of the remote learning. I didn’t enjoy it at all and it definitely impacted my grades and mental health so. Yeah, I am not a fan”.

(Michael)

“I definitely feel less confident with what I’ve learned. If you asked me what I had learned last year, I would struggle to tell you”.

(Nancy)

Jake felt similar in that COVID-19 restrictions led to a changing social environment and a different cultural experience than expected during his first year at university. His confidence with making friends and being able to engage with non-academic activities appears to have been disrupted.

“I would say a lot of the experience was just Zoom life. Like, I can’t say with confidence that I made many friends. I can’t say with confidence that I really, actively engaged outside of just lessons. I think the effect of COVID pushing away the social elements of university, even just being in a classroom, it’s either the type of person that can make fast friends or you don’t”.

(Jake)

From some of the comments made by participants, it seemed that the structured nature of classes (typical for educational settings) was no more. Lectures were pre-recorded and students would decide when they would watch these. As well as working from home, this unstructured approach is quite a cultural shift for institutions.

“My lectures and seminars and lab classes, they were all pre-recorded and put online. They were left for you to do whenever you wanted to do them. So, there was a lot of, you needed to be really motivated to get up and do them otherwise I wouldn’t have done anything if I didn’t have any kind of motivation. But then the lockdown lasted longer than I thought it would as well. And they still hadn’t introduced as many live zoom sessions as I thought they would. So, it was still very much, kind of, left to your own devices with pre-recorded sessions”.

(Ashford)

For some, the unstructured nature of the learning meant greater levels of motivation needed to be conjured. Furthermore, the blurring of boundaries between a relaxing place with a work and social space became a concern.

“All at the same desk, in the room where you’re supposed to sleep and relax as well. It was really difficult to kind of separate those boundaries, so I would end up doing a lot of work sat in bed. But then when I’d go to sleep in that same bed, I’d be like, this is so strange. It wasn’t very good for my mental well-being but I got through it”.

(Ashford)

However, some participants did like remote learning and felt that it gave them greater control over the experience for the better.

“I could pause the lecture when I wanted to, when I felt I wanted a break, when I felt like I needed to pause the person so I could jot down more notes. It allowed me to have control over my learning that I don’t think I would have had in, like, pre-pandemic regular lectures”.

(Mary)

“I can just kind of wake up when I want and do them when I want. So that was one good thing because I am not a morning person at all. Waking me up for a 9am live lecture is a no go for me. So, that is one thing that I did enjoy”.

(Michael)

Although there was a loss of the expected way of learning, some participants found that this loss birthed new opportunities and that remote learning could continue to have a role within education delivery. Some participants valued the opportunity to engage with online break-out groups as this not only aided with their learning but also permitted social interaction.

“Blended learning. I think for next year and personally, I am the cohort respondent and I feedback...and we have found it really helpful in terms of them giving us the material for the session, which we do independently, and then we come forward on Zoom and go into groups and talk about it”

(Ellie)

“I think also tutorials in first year where tutors were able to speak to students and people were able to speak to other people. Especially in break out rooms. I know a lot of people hated it because they don’t like being randomly being assigned to a room with strangers. But I didn’t actually mind it. I think it was a good thing”.

(Sapphire)

Jake felt frustrated that his learning experience was not as expected and was concerned that this would have ramifications for his life after leaving university. After much effort, it appears Jake is frustrated with the learning environment that transpired and its effects upon the socio-cultural environment of university life. He stated that he does not see himself as a real student due to momentous change in what he expected university life to be like.

“I think it’s really frustrating because I tried my best to get into this institution and it feels, sort of like, a stab in the back which isn’t...I wouldn’t say it’s inherently anyone’s fault, it’s fate for lack of a better term. But it’s very frustrating to build yourself up to this opportunity, to work hard to be in the place that you’re in as someone who prioritises it so much and someone who gets so much validation from being a good student, to then be told...yeah you might not be as appealing as an applicant to things like jobs, further study because your degree was online. So, it sort of takes away that level of being good I guess. It’s really frustrating as a student to not be a real student in the way that, you know, people younger than you are going to have”.

(Jake)

4.4 Pandemic encouraging a sense of community and bonding

This theme recognises that sense of community and bonding between students through a very difficult time for the world. Despite a great deal of loss (from the loss of lives to loss of socio-cultural experiences), this theme recognises how students can be brought together despite the challenges. Despite the loss of university based social and cultural experiences that were expected, some participants commented upon how they were able to develop strong bonds with others. Michael stated that he did not believe he would have had the same level of friendship with his housemates if it were not due to COVID-19 restrictions. This is perhaps a curious and unexpected side effect of the difficult restrictions that participants had to live by.

“In a way, I feel like it has made me a lot closer to certain people. Just like because like, being locked down, you are forced to spend time with a bunch of people or only get to know a small group of people. So, I feel very close to a select few people which is quite nice. I know without a doubt that I would not have that same level of friendship if it were a normal academic year. Because I know that I would just be going out all the time and not really spending that much time with them”.

(Michael)

Nancy appeared to have a similar experience to Michael in that she was able to develop close bonds with those she was living with. By developing these bonds, it clearly aided Nancy to manage the limited social contact that she was experiencing and the overall pressure upon well-being that the pandemic caused.

“So, by lockdown 3, I moved flats to live with my best friend. So, then we were there together which was fine because it didn’t feel like I was in a lockdown. Because lockdown 1 when you were with your family was really hard but lockdown with your friends at uni, you keep studying and you keep going to the shop to get food and you keep hanging out. So, nothing really changes. Nothing really stopped. So, it didn’t

feel as hard and it got a lot easier living there. Yeah, it just didn't feel as hard as before so when you're stuck together you just bond so much quicker than you normally would because there's no one else there. And even though I didn't live with a lot of my friends, I feel like I did because that's all I knew. Waking up, attend my lectures and then I'd go see them in their flat. So, we got along very quickly which was good for me because we like each other and we're still friends but if we didn't like each other, that would be really hard. But I think we were very lucky".

(Nancy)

Ashford stated that one of the good things that have come out of not having the socio-cultural experiences he expected due to COVID-19 restrictions, was that he was forced into tackling his natural shyness and developing the confidence to make new connections. By facing this challenge, he was able to develop strong connections with others at a time when most in person social interaction was illegal.

"So, the fact that I had to get up and introduce myself to these strangers was daunting but I knew I wouldn't get much time to spend time with anyone else. I knew I had to push myself to do that. I have made lifelong friends because of that so I would say that is the one good thing that has come from it really".

(Ashford)

The strong bonds between some students that the COVID-19 restrictions appeared to encourage were clearly important for the well-being of students. Nancy considered leaving her course and starting again once the pandemic was over. She commented that the only things that stopped her from delaying her course were the bonds that she connected with others. This experience perhaps demonstrates that students were able to have social experiences that were supportive and perhaps lived up to initial expectations.

"I think that is the only thing that stopped me...because I like my course. I just would have started my course again but I didn't want to do that because I didn't want to be

the year below my friends and wanted to keep going with them. I'd say that was the only good thing about the lockdowns was bonding very quickly...but yeah. I think university wise, there was nothing that was good but socially that was the only plus I can think of".

(Nancy)

In order to develop these strong bonds and to salvage social and cultural experiences, it seemed that a number of participants relied upon personal determination and (at times) the breaking of COVID-19 rules to make this happen. One participant stated that he felt that students desire to relate to others. This is understandable given that many first year undergraduate students are being introduced to an environment where they may not have any existing connections with another person.

"I think with students, especially during the pandemic, we have a need to feel related to other people. Just because it makes us feel more connected in a way".

(Michael)

Michael stated that it was important for him to make every effort to make friends, despite some rule breaking, as he needed the support network for his overall well-being. The lack of a social network when first starting university is incredibly difficult for students and thus it is understandable to feel the need to create the connections he did. Relating to others is valuable.

"I went to flat parties even though we weren't supposed to. I met course mates even though you weren't meant to mix bubbles. So, I really took every opportunity to just try and make some friends. So, if someone put in the group chat, my course group chat, does anyone want to go out for food? I would be like, yes. Let's go. Like, just...or I would put in the chat, does anyone want to go out for a drink or walk? Even if I did not know them, I would just try every opportunity to get to know someone. Also, just because I wanted that support network there. I am quite a sociable person

even though I am quite shy but yeah. I managed to make quite a few friends but I guess not as many as I wanted to”.

(Michael)

Other participants also felt like they could break the rules in place so that they could develop the social connections they felt they needed to support them whilst at university. At times, it seems participants bargained with themselves to help them to decide whether they were making the right decision when socialising during a pandemic.

“I went to like a house party...which you obviously you weren’t meant to do...erm..but it was like a friends birthday on my course and she invited me. So, I was like, I am going to go and if there’s loads of people I will just leave or whatever. And I had just had COVID at that point and you’re and you’re meant to be immune for a few months and it’s like...everyone is doing it. It’s fine”

(Ellie)

“Everyone was sort of breaking the rules so you felt a bit less bad to break the rules. I am talking about COVID regulations”.

(Adam)

A number of the participants also developed relationships online prior to COVID-19 restrictions easing and being able to meet in person. James mentioned how he felt lonely at first, however as the connections he made online developed, he felt able to relate to peers more and more. The need for finding people to relate to was being met to an extent. These relationships developed further once restrictions were eased.

“I just met loads of people online or on groups that were, sort of, university groups. Then when restrictions sort of relaxed, I started meeting those people in real life. Even though there weren’t many organised events as I was initially expecting, I just

met, like, individual people or groups. I had loads of shared experiences with them and it was...it felt very reassuring to sort of see that so many other people were having similar experiences to mine. It really satisfied my...my need for like, finding people who are similar to me. If that makes sense”.

(James)

Sapphire also found social media a vital tool to developing her social network and being able to connect to others. Sapphire stated that she did not feel like her social experience was “that bad” due to the efforts she put into socialising online which eventually translated to friendships in real life.

“I think in the first year because I am pretty much a sociable person, we had Facebook group chats and WhatsApp group chats and I followed people on Instagram from Freshers groups and everything. So, I feel like with the social aspect it was okay. Like, I was able to meet people from my course. Meet people from Uni based on social media”.

(Sapphire)

In the absence of being able to meet fellow students in person, Sapphire went on to comment that social media was also important to aid her to meet other queer Muslim people. It was important for her to connect with other queer Muslim people in order to relate and create shared experiences with those from the same community. This was important for Sapphire’s identity and personal development it seemed.

“I downloaded TikTok and there’s like a huge Queer Muslim space on TikTok. This is always nice to see because it’s nice for people to have a platform when experiences are similar to you. But like, with the whole uni aspect, I have found quite a few people are considered Queer Muslims. Everyone is just like, whenever I speak to them and I tell them, it is always, like, it’s just really nice to have people that actually understand”.

(Sapphire)

Another participant, Jake, felt that a sense of community and bonding developed between students and university staff members too. He commented that the shared tragedy of a pandemic and its repercussions led to a sense of solidarity and additional support from staff.

“I definitely think from a university perspective, there has been a lot of coming together, especially from staff. Although they might not understand all of the students’ concerns, they might not know how to fix everything, there is definitely a sort of unity from the university in the sense of we’re going through the same thing. This isn’t exactly the best situation to be in but there’s that sort of promotion of, you know, support and caring of each other that I don’t think any other year would have got in university. So, I think there’s a sense of community in the tragedy I guess”.

(Jake)

4.5 Disappointment, anger and worsening of wellbeing

This theme recognises the disappointment and anger that participants encountered as a result of the perceived loss of socio-cultural experiences and the wide ranging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme also recognises the worsening of well-being that participants experienced. This section will share participants’ emotional experiences with the use of direct quotations.

Sapphire explained how she felt let down by the experiences of the socio-cultural environment of university life. She stated that she and her peers experienced suffering as a result of a combination of difficult situations related to education.

“A bit let down because I think our year group have suffered a lot over the few years. First GCSE’s, then A-Level’s cancelled and Uni is online. It was just a lot going on”.

(Sapphire)

One participant felt that his university had made “promises” that the educational experiences would be COVID-19 safe which would mean participants would be based at campus receiving in person learning. As this did not happen, this participant felt anger.

“It made me feel angry. Especially just...I’m paying this much money for you to give me an education and you have made all these promises that you’re going to make it COVID safe, to make it interactive, you’re going to make the lectures and assessments fun. But, like, it wasn’t that”.

(Michael)

This sense of disappointment was echoed by other participants.

“I do think the university could have made it a little bit more...made the experience people a little bit better than what they actually have done”.

(Anne)

Nancy spoke of the frustration of feeling like she is not being listened to when raising concerns with her university and this led to her questioning her importance in the eyes of the institution. It appeared this frustration may have also stemmed from not feeling part of a community as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions.

“It’s just really frustrating because you feel like you are not being listened to. So, it feels like you are not part of the community of the uni and you are not part of, like, everything that revolves around uni because you’re not being listened to. So then obviously you are not that important. Them not having the answers is really

frustrating because it is really something that is ruining our life at the moment and they're not going to tell you when it's going to end".

(Nancy)

Jake echoed the frustration of his peer, stating that he did not feel connected to the institution due to the very different social and cultural experiences (for example, not being on campus) that the situation presented him with.

"I wouldn't say I feel like a part of my institution. I'd say I feel like a person who gave money to my institution and they gave me a website".

(Jake)

However, some participants believed that there was little their university could do to salvage their social and cultural experiences that were ultimately disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I would definitely say, looking back on it, I would not necessarily say COVID or university are at fault".

(Jake)

Some participants felt disappointed by the student union and associated student societies. Ashford commented that he felt the LGBTQ+ society could have been more engaging with students, however this was not the case and led him to feel annoyed.

"Well, I was expecting some kind of like...even just meetings over Zoom. Something where they would put together an event where I could interact with other people who had joined the society. Like just join a Zoom meeting or something because I mean, the opportunity for in person wasn't really there at the time. I thought there would be

more effort put into making us feel included in this society that we just joined but I didn't really get that any of that. It was just more emails about roles within the society for people who had already been signed up for a while I think. So, it was just kind of...it kind of made me feel excluded when it was society that I wanted to join to feel the most included in. So, that was a bit annoying”.

(Ashford)

Understandably, the well-being of participants was affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of social experiences led to deteriorating mental health, fuelled by isolation. James and Ashton mentioned that when COVID-19 restrictions were at their most severe, this was incredibly lonely and isolating time. These experiences are shared by many other participants.

“Overwhelming feeling of quarantine loneliness”.

(James)

“It was pretty depressing to be honest. My mental health definitely took a huge hit”.

(Ashford)

One of the most difficult aspects for many participants was that they were not able to make new connections and engage with old connections in the way they wanted. This would understandably affect well-being.

“So, I couldn't even see my old friends when I was struggling to meet new friends and that was probably the hardest thing for me”.

(Ellie)

For one participant, she felt she had to live two different lives as the pandemic led to her needing to live at home in her first year. This meant that not only was it difficult to meet

new people (especially LGBTQ+ people), but she was also not able to express her identity as a queer person in the way that she wanted. As Sapphire stated, this led to her mental health being influenced.

“Okay. So, as it was pretty fresh and I was still not out to my family, then it was very much draining towards the start of the year because I was trying to get all my work done and do all my lectures but then also there was this....something in the back of my mind that was draining. I feel like when you are closeted it is like living a double life. So, like, living one life is draining but living another life is extra draining. So, it just feels like you are putting on one face to show one person and then another face of another person. It can tend to get really draining on your mental health”.

(Sapphire)

Sapphire stated that the most challenging part of her first year at university was trying to manage her mental health. She stated that some of the main problems were a lack of routine and difficulties with motivation. However, as stated, many of the participants mention that feeling isolated from socio-cultural experiences was one of the driving forces of the struggles with well-being they may have encountered. This was further echoed by Michael and Mary.

“It’s just the lack of routine in the day. I need to have a set routine to keep busy. If I don’t keep busy, my anxiety can spiral. I just overthink things”.

(Michael)

“I’d say that I...because I do struggle with depression as well, that kind of feeling of hopeless. What’s the point in continuing and going on? What kind of future do I have? If I am stuck at home, not able to interact with people in the traditional way that you would have at university, I am not getting that experience that everyone else has had, then that really affected me and was really difficult to kind of get passed.

Which fortunately I did but gave me that feeling of hopelessness for such a long time”.

(Mary)

Nancy questioned why she should stay in university, explaining that she felt like there was nothing to do or explore. There was “no culture” she stated. As a result, like others, this led to the deterioration of her well-being. She stated that she felt:

“Sad. It definitely affected me quite a lot. I think before Christmas I was really miserable”.

(Nancy)

For some, the affect the pandemic had upon their well-being meant that they needed to take a break from university.

“So, I took 2 or 3 months out of uni. I just had a break”.

(Anne)

Although the majority of participants mention struggles with their mental health, as demonstrated in other parts of this chapter, there were times when well-being was influenced for the better. Michael mentioned how he felt comfortable enough with the environment of his university city that he began to express his identity through clothing. The accepting environment he found himself in led to a positive effect upon his overall well-being.

“It just made me feel very safe and it has made me more confident to just do what I want to do without the fear that someone if going to have a go at me for doing it”.

(Michael)

4.6 Difficulties accessing formal support and other approaches to support wellbeing

This theme recognises some of the difficulties that participants encountered when attempting to access formal support for their mental health. This was in some cases from mental health professionals but for others from university staff. This support does not just relate to mental health but support connecting to others as well as with academic work. The theme also recognises that in the absence of formal support, students took steps to try their best to manage their well-being in a variety of ways.

From some of the interviews, there was notable anger (and sarcasm) directed towards different departments of the university. There seemed to be a feeling of being let down and not listened to by the university. I had a sense that some students did not feel the university did enough to support students and some students were unimpressed at advice given, such as that they should go for a walk. The following exchange perhaps demonstrates this:

“Participant: I tried to contact the counselling service once, but I was told that the waiting list was very long and I couldn’t see anyone for a few months. And that I should go for a walk. So that was really helpful... I tried speaking to, sort of, leaders of the course and if they knew anymore about in person learning but obviously that came to nothing as we are still online. But yeah, that was about all I could really do...was just keep asking but nobody knew what was going to happen with the pandemic. But there was never an answer”.

Researcher: “What’s it like for you to experience that not having an answer?”

Participant: “It was really hard because I still don’t have an answer and it’s still going on. And it’s just really frustrating because you feel like you are not being listened to. So, it feels like you are not part of the community of the uni and you are

not part of, like, everything that revolves around uni because you're not being listened to. So then obviously you are not that important".

(Nancy)

The apparent anger at university staff was shared by other participants who felt like they were unimportant and not receiving the support needed. Sapphire appears to express a disappointment that greater mental health support was not provided by the university, sharing her distaste at alleged Instagram posts the university had made suggesting that the COVID-19 lockdown could be framed as like a spa break. This understandably provoked anger amongst students and fuelled a growing feeling of being let down by the institution. Due to the responses of the participants, I believe they genuinely questioned whether the university cared for them as people or not. Please see appendix 11 for additional supporting quotes.

"I think the university as a whole, they didn't really take into account student mental health as much as they should have. We got the odd email about self-care but obviously that is not enough".

(Ashford)

"I think also the mental health aspect of it, like, I think I always assumed that university would provide more, like, support that would actually help. And not just say that they see the lockdown as a retreat...with the whole mental health aspect, it could have been nice to have a bit more support. Like, the uni not just making little statements that are not even entirely relevant. I'd rather they offer actual support. They were mindlessly posting links to external charities rather than actually looking like they care. This would have helped a lot. I think with the whole isolation thing, it was very difficult to deal with".

(Sapphire)

The anger that some students experienced appears linked to the perception that staff teams at the university did not care for students as much as they could have and that the lack of mental health support and support when households were diagnosed with COVID-19 was evidence of this.

“I know that I reached out a few times and they always said they would get back to me. But I wouldn’t hear from them for weeks. Like, there would be a new development and I would have a new issue I needed help with. They would say, well you’re going to have to reapply. Go through another process because we need to change it up. Then I would be waiting again. I just don’t think they really cared about the students that much. I think they maybe just cared about, like, just get tuition fees from student”.

“When we all got COVID, the uni didn’t really give us any support. Like, we emailed our accommodation advisors and then they said we will get in touch with the uni. Then they said we just need to isolate. They didn’t give us any supplies of food or basic toiletries”.

(Michael)

Some participants hoped their university would take an active role in providing various forms of support, however expectations did not seem to match the reality of the situation.

“I thought there might have been more virtual things. I have sort of like, looked at other universities social medias. They were sort of doing a lot more things online. So, I was quite disappointed that there was not a lot of things going on online really”.

(Anne)

“So, you could ask a question about a lecture for clarification and then sometimes the lecturer would reply like...oh, just re-watch the lecture. Or they will say something witty like, oh if you don't understand the content, just re-watch the lecture. And if you still don't understand it, then re-watch it again. It was just very rude”.

(Michael)

Ashford was also hoping that the LGBTQ+ society, part of the student union, would be able to provide emotional and social support during the pandemic. Unfortunately, this did not manifest as he had hoped and this caused disappointment that greater efforts were not made to help students feel more a part of university life.

“Well, I joined it and I expected some kind of like activity with it despite the pandemic but there was not much going on in terms of that society. I got a few emails and that was about it really. So, I think that maybe the organisation of the LGBTQ+ society in particular wasn't prepared for the circumstances of the pandemic”.

(Ashford)

Not all participants had difficulties accessing support. One participant spoke of free therapy that she was able to access and this was incredibly helpful for her.

“After 6 years of mental health difficulties, I finally spoke to my GP and got some anti-depressants and I had some therapy which was organised by a trainee psychologist for a project. Which was like 12 weeks of free therapy which was nice to have”.

(Sapphire)

“I did therapy for quite a few months and that really helped me through that period of...I think I started in October 2020. So that kind of saw me through a very difficult period and yeah”.

(Mary)

However, it was felt by one participant that being able to access free services could have been advertised more clearly.

“I think there’s a therapy service that’s free...I think they should have made that more approachable I guess. Because it wasn’t really advertised and there wasn’t really any information about it. It was kind of just like...you had to really search for any information about it”.

(Ashford)

Some participants also had the support of their family when they may have been struggling.

“I definitely had a lot of support from my family. From my mum and dad, who I live with. So, they really supported me in terms of being able to...any kind of worries or concerns that I had, I was able to voice them to them and they really supported me through that”.

(Mary)

“I went home more than I thought I would and I live quite far away. I think I went home 4 or 5 times last year, a few times just because I really needed to because I just felt awful being at Uni because nothing was going right”.

(Nancy)

The COVID-19 pandemic, the restrictions upon life and a change to the expected socio-cultural life of university appeared to have a substantial influence upon the well-being of participants. Although some students were able to access professional support, many did not and so embraced other approaches to support their well-being. In order to support his well-being, Michael spoke of the importance of exercising, changing his environment and creating any form of structure in his day (within the boundaries of social restrictions). This was clearly helpful for him.

“If my housemates are like, do you want to go for a walk, I’d be like yes. Please can we go for a walk. And when we were only allowed to go for a walk once a day, I would take every opportunity. If there was a free booking space, I would just go to get me out of my room because I need to stay active. I need to walk, run, exercise otherwise it’s mainly...it’s for my mental health. I can’t sit in the same space for too long because all the thoughts start to spiral and I don’t like going down the whole rabbit hole”.

(Michael)

Ashford spoke of taking a similar approach to building a routine or structure during times when social mixing with other household was not permitted. He appeared to adapt his behaviour so that he was able to maximise the amount of social time he had with others so that he could develop the connections with people that were important for his well-being.

“Well, for the online learning challenge, once the library opened up I started to go to the library most days to get my work done rather than sit in my room. And most evenings as well, me and my other flatmates would sit in the kitchen and talk about our days and we’d try and watch a film or start a series on Netflix or something. All sit around the table so that we would still get that social time I guess. And when I was cooking, I tried to cook around a similar time to other people so I would be in the kitchen able to have a conversation with someone else if they were cooking at the same time”.

(Ashford)

Michael also mentioned that he often felt quite isolated in his apartment as he had struggled to bond with his housemates. Eventually, this led to him moving to a different halls of residence and nearer to people who he did know at university. Michael spoke of this being a helpful change to improve his mental health. A more favourable social environment was important to this. Ellie was in a similar position, deciding to move back home when it proved her living situation was difficult following not bonding with her housemates. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place, Ellie's housemates were the only people she could interact with in person. As she was not able to develop a relationship with them, the environment was uncomfortable for her and she felt she needed to change the situation. Although this was a sad event to occur for Ellie, it was a decision made to support her well-being.

"So, I came home (laughs) and I was also like I can work, get money and I have got my accommodation contract fee back for the last term".

(Ellie)

Ashford also spoke of additional measures he took to improve his well-being. He stated that the university would not allow students to go home during teaching breaks and that wardens at the halls of residence would prevent people from doing so. Ashford felt like the rules needed to be broken for the sake of his own mental health. I think this example demonstrates the awareness that many students have of their own mental health and the determination to help themselves where they can.

"So, one time my dad had driven down to pick me up because I wasn't allowed to get the train. And I had to sneak out at like seven in the morning or something, before they woke up, so I wouldn't get caught with my suitcase and get told to go to my room. Because I really needed to go home at this point because I missed my family way too much. That was really difficult. Not being able to see them whenever I wanted".

(Ashford)

One participant spoke of how engaging with the arts was incredibly therapeutic during the difficult times of the pandemic. Being able to express herself through poetry or performances appeared to be helpful for supporting the well-being of this participant at a time when social and cultural experiences were limited. Through the use of social media, Sapphire was able to engage with what she values to some extent.

“I also write poetry which helps me a lot and during the pandemic, it was at the point where I wrote the most. It would always be a coping mechanism. I do performances at times. I performed yesterday which was pretty nice. It is always nice to get up on stage and express my feelings. Obviously during COVID I couldn’t do that but I still practiced some pieces and I have an Instagram page which I post on. It’s just nice to express yourself. Sometimes, often when I am trying to explain my feelings, I can’t always explain it properly. When it is in poetry, I am okay”.

(Sapphire)

Sapphire also spoke of how she and others used social media as an avenue to access peer support and to develop relationships with others. The use of social media appears to have been incredibly important to enable students to stay connected at such a difficult time for the world. The support from others and knowing that others are perhaps “in the same boat” appears helpful for well-being.

“I was just chatting by Instagram or Zoom calls with people. We used to do, on our course, there was like this support group. A group of people...it was just to help people who were feeling isolated and stuff. And then, like a lot of people used to talk to people on our Facebook group chats which was always nice because it had people who were in the same boat”.

(Sapphire)

4.7 Importance of LGBTQ+ community and spaces

Developing connections within a LGBTQ+ community and being in environments that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ people were important to the social and cultural experiences of the university students interviewed for this project. This theme aims to recognise this and share the experiences of the participants.

As members of the LGBTQ+ community, a number of the participants had quite positive experiences during their first year at university. Participant's commented upon how they felt the student environment and perceived liberal nature of the city they are living in aided them to feel comfortable and safe. Additionally, some participants commented upon how those around them, especially those who may have aligned to being heterosexual, were supportive and non-judgemental. This perhaps therefore permits LGBTQ+ students to feel validating and safe in the social environment as well as comfortable to further explore the different cultures of the LGBTQ+ community. Some of the participants express below the importance of an inclusive university environment.

“What makes that important for me? The fact that I come from a place that is not very friendly to LGBTQ people. Especially to trans people so that is really important for me because I don't really have that at home”.

(James)

“I think it was good, positive for the most part because everyone in my flat was very friendly and liberal and half of us were LGBTQ+. And then, with the other half just being very supportive and lovely. Like I had, we had discussions about sexuality with the cis-het people in the group which was really lovely and nice. It was not an environment that I felt unsafe. It was very open”.

(Adam)

Michael also commented upon how the social and cultural expectations of university life did live up to the expectations he had regarding university being a liberal environment. This led to him feeling more comfortable within himself.

“That expectation was true. I felt more comfortable in terms of people not really caring how you dress or how you act. It’s just...it’s a safer environment. Everyone is more open minded. I see straight guys wearing nail polish. Back home, no one would ever do that. I see guys wearing skirts, dresses and no one bats an eye. I love it”.

(Michael)

Adam spoke of how it has been valuable for him to develop connections with other people from the LGBTQ+ community. By doing so, this has aided him to feel comfortable to express himself in different ways to before.

“It’s been very nice to interact with more and more queer people. So, like I’ve explored the way I present myself, the way I dress and what that means to me”.

(Adam)

Mary and James spoke of how building these connections are important to her identity and socio-cultural experiences. For some participants, attending university was allowing them to connect with LGBTQ+ peers for the first time.

“I guess there’s kind of like...I feel like I have this...if someone is a member of that community, I feel like we have a base level of understanding with each other. I don’t know if that is an actual thing but it is just how I feel. That, I understand more and we have that basic thing in common. I feel like it just improves the connection, particularly for me anyway. That’s kind of important to me”.

(Mary)

“Because of discrimination that we face and because it’s, as a minority, it is really important to find people like you and sort of, like, create strong friendships with them. Sort of, have your own little group where you can offer each other help. Where you can offer each other a sort of refuge”

(James)

James went on to explain how connecting with other LGBTQ+ people permitted him to develop a safety network within his life that permitted the development of a sense of community as well. This sense of community appears to be incredibly valued by the participants for a variety of reasons.

“The fact that we have so much to share and we have so much to talk about and that I know that I sort of, have a safety network. Because I know more people like me who have a very similar nature to mine. So, yeah. It is sort of about, knowing that, meeting those people I can build a strong community with them”.

(James)

Anne had a similar experience of feeling comfortable to be herself when with other members of the LGBTQ+ community.

“She was just completely on my wavelength and I could be really open with her and she could be open and honest with me. Because she is part of the community, so I just felt like I could be myself around her and she could be herself around me. There was nobody judging us”.

(Anne)

The connection with people from a similar community appears to be incredibly important. The peer support between LGBTQ+ people appeared to be greatly valued and

despite the difficulties of COVID-19 and the restrictions, students were able to access this peer support to an extent.

“Finding friends that are going to be supportive of me as well as friends that I just get on with, have common interests with. I think that’s really been the way I have coped...just having people to be able to comfort me and also I get to, sort of, share my issues with them”.

(Adam)

It is clear that it is important to have connections to the LGBTQ+ community and safe spaces even when not “out”. One participant spoke of how she struggled at times living in a religious household and did not feel able to tell her parents that she identifies as queer. Being able to engage with other queer people appears to have helped the participant to feel more comfortable with her identity. This was difficult to do during this pandemic when social contact was limited, however this participant was able to use social media to access the people and spaces that were most validating for her.

“I think as somebody who is closeted, it is always nice to have people supporting you outside. Because I am like, closeted at home. So, it is always nice to have people outside that accept you for who you are and, like, make you feel valid in your identity despite not being out at home if you know what I mean”.

(Sapphire)

The expression of LGBTQ+ identity appeared to be central to the social and cultural experiences of participants during their first year at university. The exploration and expression of sexuality and gender without fear appears to provide a validating environment for people to grow and is important to the overall well-being of a person. The move to university that participants have made appears to have helped with this regardless of the COVID-19 restrictions.

“When I started wearing more feminine clothing, my friends were definitely very supportive. They would always compliment me, tell me that I looked good which is always very lovely to hear. That was one of the major ones...all of my friend being very supportive of me, sort of, exploring how I want to present myself to the world”.

(Adam)

“So, it’s very important for places to be liberal for LGBT people just because we just deserve to express ourselves how we want to. It’s not something that we should demand but that’s why it needs to be safe though. Just because you don’t want to be attacked or hate crimed or something like that just for the way you want to express yourself”.

(Michael)

However, expression of identity does come with risks. Adam spoke of time when his friend attended a university event and was frequently misgendered. This was a shocking and disconcerting situation for that person. Such a situation demonstrates that not all social experiences are safe when at university and that there are cultural clashes.

“And it was a workshop about inclusivity and everyone frequently misgendered them. And it is just sort of...I think it’s a lot of queer people that I have interacted with, including myself, we live in sort of a...all of our friends are queer or very queer accepting and we’re all very liberal and kind of do whatever...so then it is a bit of a shock when we interact with people who aren’t the same”.

(Adam)

James also had some difficult experiences which demonstrate that although some university cities may be perceived as liberal and open minded, this is perhaps not always the case.

“I did experience discrimination, very surprisingly, when I went out with...like...the people I was dating at the time. I have had some cases of street harassment, very surprisingly. Yeah...that is pretty much it. So yeah, most of my experiences were good but then I’ve had some very surprising bad experiences”.

(James)

Sapphire detailed how COVID-19 restrictions led to her having to stay at home with her parents where she was not able to express her identity. Her social and cultural experiences were constrained as well as her identity expression. This appeared to affect her well-being.

“Yeah. I think that when you have to hide something or conceal something or like...I feel like it is always bound to be draining. Because it just takes a toll on you. I don’t know how to describe it but...like you’re constantly not showing your full authentic self and you have to hide part of yourself for the benefit of others. I think it is always going to be draining because it drains your energy because you have to put up a front. I think that’s what I meant by draining”.

(Sapphire)

Although this was not the experience of all participants, Mary found it helpful that the LGBTQ+ society of her university still provided support and organised events during the height of the pandemic. This she found important so that she could continue to connect and interact with others within the community.

“I would say that, obviously, the society that is dedicated to LGBTQ+ people, that was still running. That was still up and running and the fact that the student union made sure that those kind of societies were still up and running. Even though I didn’t get the best, kind of, the best out of it, that was my own doing. But they had those

available which I think is brilliant. And just kind of having that availability for people to interact if they choose to. That was really good”.

(Mary)

James found joining the LGBTQ+ society enabled him to build connections online initially before meeting people when restrictions reduced. Connecting with people in this way permitted the development of friendships and shared experiences. Although a different social environment to what was expected, the process of meeting people online first seems to have been valued by many participants.

“I still joined the sort of, the society for LGBTQ people of the university. I even started getting involved. I started being a committee member there. Yeah, basically, it was amazing from that point of view. Initially, I just met loads of people online or on groups that were, sort of, university groups. Then when restrictions sort of relaxed, I started meeting those people in real life”.

(James)

However, some participants did find it difficult to connect with other LGBTQ+ people in their first year due to the COVID-19 restrictions. These restrictions appear to influence the social and cultural environments that were expected, leading to some students not having the support network that they had hoped for. In addition to the quotes below, further quotes can be found in appendix 11 to support the analysis.

“I thought that when I came to university, you know, I’d be able to meet a lot of people who are very similar to me. But then the only people I have really socialised with were the people in my flat and...I think the majority are straight people and they’re lovely and I love them. But it’s not the kind of thing I was looking for. For people I can relate to, so I was kind of like, the token gay of the flat. That is what I was called for a while. I was looking forward to joining the LGBTQ+ society because I was like, I will be able to fully express that aspect of me without having to actually

come out because, I mean, if you are obviously part of that society then you are obviously part of that community. So, it was just...I was excited to be able to relate to people on that kind of level because I had not got to do that before. Then obviously that did not end up happening. It was pretty disappointing”.

(Ashford)

Ellie found it difficult to meet LGBTQ+ people due to the COVID-19 restrictions and this appeared to affect her social and cultural experiences too.

“So that was quite hard because there were like cultural references that people weren’t getting or like, jokes that would have been like funny that weren’t anymore”.

(Ellie)

Attending a university in a city perceived to be liberal and one that has a substantial LGBTQ+ area was also important to the social and cultural experiences of some participants.

“Going to a city that had the gay village, and all of this excitement and build up about it, that was a way I could talk about this on a bigger scale. It’s what I was excited for...the concept of being with the whole sense of the community, which I really didn’t have in the place I went to school. Because it wasn’t a major thing, was just....so amazing”.

(Ellie)

“I think going out there, because you are with everyone who is part of the community, it feels like you’re all part of one things and it’s really comforting and you feel safe. It was hard to not have that because you, you sort of just, you don’t really recognise

that part of yourself until you get to experience it with other people who are the same”.

(Nancy)

COVID-19 restrictions meant that it was not possible to go to or meet people in LGBTQ+ venues and cultural spaces. This led to challenges connecting with others and made people more isolated. Being able to be within LGBTQ+ safe spaces is clearly important to the well-being of the members of this community.

“It feels very isolating because I haven’t kind of explored my community in the way that I wanted to and developed new connections outside of the connections I already have. It kind of feels like I am in the exact same position as I was the year prior...and yeah. Like the expectation year”.

(Mary)

“It was hard to not experience that because it’s sort of a big part of the city and I wasn’t allowed to experience it”.

(Nancy)

James helpfully described what it is like to be in the company of other LGBTQ+ people and therefore further demonstrates how difficult it must have been for some of the participants to not be able to always relate to people similar to them as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

“I feel a lot less lonely basically. It sort of satisfies the need to...to like up with people...to group up with people who I have something shared with that is really important. Like, a big part of my identity of who I have shared with you know. I hope that makes sense”.

(James)

Although the COVID-19 restrictions have now been lifted, one student felt like he still was not able to embrace these cultural spaces. He stated a belief that the time to do this (and have lots of fun), was in his first year. Beyond the first year was a time when he really needed to focus upon his studies more than embracing socio-cultural experiences.

“I had that time to go for it and I wasn’t allowed to because of the experience of covid. And now I can’t go back to that, even though I very explicitly can. It’s that sort of expectation in my head...where I have sort of laid that rule for myself. So, I would definitely say that has been the impact that it has had on me”.

(Jake)

4.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, themes have been presented that capture LGBTQ+ first year undergraduate students’ expectations and experiences of the socio-cultural university environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter provides an analysis of the data with supporting evidence in the form of direct quotes.

Themes were developed through engaging with reflexive thematic analysis, leading to the generation of six themes by the end of the analysis process. The first of those themes is that of students having high expectations of university life. This theme recognises that students had hopes and expectations for their time at university, but that these may have been overly high given the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme notes that students began to adapt their expectations as it became more apparent that their university social and cultural experiences would not be as hoped. The second theme explored in this chapter acknowledged the perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences as a consequence of the pandemic. The loss of in person teaching played a significant role in the

loss of social and cultural experiences. These losses provided other opportunities but the analysis of the data recognises the sadness and disappointment that students felt.

A theme was also generated that documented how the pandemic encouraged a sense of community and bonding. Despite the incredibly challenging time for the participants of this study, a number of students were able to develop close bonds and connections with others that were incredibly supportive. However, the fourth theme generated identified that there was a great deal of disappointment, anger and worsening of well-being for many participants. Understandably, the pandemic presented a challenge to the mental health of participants and the loss of experiences provoked the expression of raw emotions. In the face of these challenges to well-being, the fifth theme recognised the difficulties that students had with accessing formal support. Some participants believed they did not receive the support that would have been helpful for them, for example, from counselling services or university staff. The theme also explored how students attempted to find differing ways to support their well-being. The final theme explained the importance of the LGBTQ+ community and spaces to the participants of this study. The significance of inter-community connections and inclusive spaces are expressed, detailing their importance to safe and identity affirming socio-cultural environments.

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss and examine what expectations and experiences LGBTQ+ first year undergraduate students had of university life during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with the research questions, this chapter will specifically explore and discuss the expectations and experiences relating to students' socio-cultural environments, linking the findings to existing literature.

The discussion will explore the expectations that participants had of the socio-cultural environment of university life and how these may have been misaligned with actual experiences. Whilst using the previous literature to discuss, I will also explore how limited socio-cultural experiences influenced the mental well-being of participants and the struggles that they may have had in seeking support. Furthermore, this discussion will acknowledge the importance of LGBTQ+ communities and safe spaces. Alongside these discussions, I will explore the implications for the findings of this study and share proposals of how universities can learn from the experiences of these participants. Finally, at the end of this chapter I will review the implications of this research and how the knowledge generated could be of use to universities, student unions, support services and the counselling psychology profession. The hope is that this research will be able to add value to the existing literature and contribute to conversation relating to how we can continually improve the support provided to LGBTQ+ students.

5.2 The purpose of the research

Counselling psychologists have long engaged with research and therapeutic work that focuses upon the subjective experiences of human beings. Jones Nielsen and Nicholas (2016) asserted that counselling psychologists aim to understand the subjective human experience in relation to the physical, social, and cultural environments that those humans exist within. With this in mind, as a doctorate student within this field of psychology, I found I had the opportunity to conduct research that aimed to explore the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ students and being able to contribute to a gap in the research that had been identified.

At the time of writing, a review of the literature identified that there were a limited number of qualitative studies that investigated the experiences students had during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it was identified that there was limited literature that explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ students as well as research that paid attention to socio-cultural experiences. The literature review underlined the significance and potential transformational capability that a transition from further to higher education could have for a LGBTQ+ person. Therefore, this research aimed to develop more of an understanding of how first year LGBTQ+ undergraduate students had experienced this time in their life.

This thesis aimed to address the knowledge gap identified and contribute to the developing body of research relating to how different populations experienced the pandemic and the implications of these experiences. As a researcher I was keen to explore the expectations that LGBTQ+ students had regarding their university socio-cultural environments prior to the pandemic as well as their actual experiences of this during the pandemic.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What expectations did first year undergraduates have of the university socio-cultural environment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have first year undergraduates experienced the university socio-cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

5.3 Key Findings

Chapter four presented an in-depth insight into the socio-cultural expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ first year students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of the data led to the generation of six themes: the high expectations of university life; a perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences; the pandemic encouraging a sense of community and bonding; disappointment, anger and worsening of wellbeing; difficulties accessing formal support and other approaches to support wellbeing; and the importance of LGBTQ+ community and spaces. The themes generated from this research project contribute to the understanding of LGBTQ+ first year students' expectations and experiences of their socio-cultural university environment. Each participants' expectations and experiences are unique to them; however, it is helpful to understand patterns and similarities that could provide learning and insights into how LGBTQ+ students' experiences at university can be improved.

The findings of this study will be discussed alongside existing research. Underlying meanings and the importance of these findings will be presented. Previous research has suggested that students have long had high expectations of university life. This thesis respects such findings but proposes that universities play a role in exacerbating high expectations and have not done enough to align student expectations with actual experiences. Moreover, this discussion will explore how the mental health of participants were affected due to the social and cultural consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Arguments will be made as to how universities can further their commitment to supporting students especially for groups such as the LGBTQ+ community who are considered to be disproportionately affected by mental health struggles. Finally, it was found that even the most limited access to LGBTQ+ safe spaces or communities during the pandemic were vitally important for participants. The discussion will explore how universities and student unions could have taken greater steps to provide these spaces and what learning can be taken forward from the challenges encountered.

5.4 High hopes and expectations

Embarking upon any adventure is often fuelled by a variety of motivations, and expectations of what that adventure may hold. This is no different for students making the decision to go to university. The reviewed literature informs us that motivations and expectations of university life can be influenced by a number of variables, including socio-economic background, personality, and culture (Balloo et al, 2015). Regardless of sexual or gender identity, the literature notes that all students have differing motivations and expectations of university life whether that be to venture to a bigger city, to maximise social opportunities or to be independent from care givers (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). However, for LGBTQ+ students the decision as to which university to apply to and therefore what to expect may be somewhat more complex. Taulke-Johnson (2010) noted that some students may be more strategic about their choices as they may expect a certain city or region of the country to provide a friendlier environment for LGBTQ+ people.

The participants of this study were all first year undergraduate students who identified within the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about their expectations of the socio-cultural environment of university life, on the whole participants spoke of their excitement for making new connections, their learning environment and being able to engage with differing cultures. Additionally, excitement was fuelled due to an expectation that there would be an opportunity to be in an environment that was liberal, progressive, and inclusive. Participants spoke of the expectation of having a busy social life that may involve engaging with student societies. Many were also looking forward to clubbing or partying as this may have been a chance to develop new social connections as well as be an entirely novel opportunity for them. Although attending university can be a transformative experience that can provide excitement, it can also fuel anxiety and nerves (Falconer & Taylor, 2016). This position was reflected within this study as some participants were concerned about their ability to make social connections and relationships. There appeared to be an underlying fear of not being able to be included, however on the most part students reported their excitement for a new chapter in their lives.

LGBTQ+ students may have complex feelings, considerations, and expectations of university life in part due to the extent to which they may be able to engage with and express their sexual or gender identity (Stonewall, 2021). However, the 2021 Stonewall report noted that over half of the LGBTQ+ students surveyed for their report planned to be open about their identity and just over two thirds of students stated that they expected university to be a

good or very good experience for them. These findings reflected some of the expectations and experiences of the participants of this study. Some participants spoke of eagerly anticipating the socio-cultural environment of university life as they believed that they would not be judged negatively for being a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Others had the hope and expectation that they would meet others from the community, be able to embrace the LGBTQ+ area of their university city and be freely able to express their identity in contrast to their life at school.

5.5 The void between expectation and reality

Participants had great hopes for their freedom, independence, and opportunities that they may not have had the chance to embrace before. From the data analysis, there is a sense of excitement to be able to express ones identity and engage with people from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, there seems to be a sense of glee that participants would no longer be consistently answerable to care givers and that new social or cultural experiences could be in reach. Sadly, the excitement for these socio-cultural experiences was to be dashed by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social mixing was mostly outlawed, in person teaching ceased and university campuses were deserted. The social and cultural richness of university life that students have come to expect was no more. Understandably in the months prior to starting their first year at university, participants began to adjust their expectations of the socio-cultural environment due to the social restrictions in place. Before they had even transpired, participants experienced sadness, disappointment, and a sense of loss. Many of the participants were able to engage with social and cultural experiences to an extent, however there were some who felt they had minimal or no experiences of note. Those who did feel like they were able to, for example, develop close connections with others stated that this was a situation that did not meet their expectations in the main. This void between expectation and reality understandably challenged the psychological well-being of participants. Given that research informs us that LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately affected by mental health difficulties, this additional pressure for students was clearly an unwelcome one.

Given the void between expectations and reality, one wonders whether the expectations that students had of their university socio-cultural environment were too high.

The immediate response I have to this is absolutely not. Their expectations seemed to be realistic if it were not for a once in a century event that dramatically changed human behaviour. I have a great deal of compassion for all participants who felt they had lost a chapter of their life and that their mental health was affected. However, the reviewed literature does demonstrate that arguably some students have high expectation of their university life and that these expectations deviate from what institutions can realistically support with (Balloo et al, 2015; Crisp et al, 2009; Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Levine (1993) described students as consumers of a service and as a result this may promote high expectations. Expectations of university life include: a place of personal development; a place to develop social networks; and a pathway to developing a successful career (Balloo et al, 2015; Money et al, 2017). Brinkworth et al (2009) went further suggesting that often students expect a university system that is similar to their school experience, for example, regular access to tutors. Yet it is acknowledged in the research that motivations and expectations for university life vary from person to person (Crisp et al, 2009).

5.6 Institution responsibility for expectation setting

The idea that students have high expectations seems a fair perspective as a university (and its staff) are not responsible for ensuring that all cultural and social expectations are fulfilled. Institutions can provide many of the ingredients that would lead to fruitful and welcomed socio-cultural campus environment including, inclusive classroom environments, inclusive curriculums, support for student union societies and opportunities to develop an understanding of differing cultures. However, a university does not have the power to influence all expectations to become reality. Students themselves have a responsibility to make their expectations a reality, moderate them if they are unrealistic and to learn from the experience if expectations are not met. This may be true, yet as discussed in the literature review, universities do have a responsibility to understand the experiences of their students and communicate realistic expectations of student life to current and future students. This research has revealed that from the perspective of some participants, they did not believe their university set realistic expectations. One of the participants stated that assurances were given that they would be able to engage with in person teaching in a COVID safe way. This stance reflects conversations I had with incoming undergraduate students (separate to this

research project) as well as media reports at the time. When a participant's university did not fulfil the "promises" made, this caused a great deal of anguish. In their 2018 paper, Hassel and Ridout had already argued for improved communication between universities and students so that realistic expectations of university life could be held. This is especially true for this situation and there is hope that moving forward, communication channels and styles can be tailored to provide compassionate but realistic information as to what students can expect of their institution. Furthermore, Nadelson et al (2013) argued for greater attention to be paid to the differences with staff and student expectations. Many of the participants within this study appeared to have quite high expectations of staff members and were disappointed by the limited engagement and support that staff provided. However, often university staff members have varied roles including that of researcher, teacher, and line manager. These varying roles make it incredibly difficult for staff members to meet all the needs of students, particularly when the culture and purpose of a university is not that of a secondary school. Moving forwards, perhaps greater efforts could be made by universities to communicate boundaries and what to expect of university staff members. This is not to say staff members should not care or provide support for their students. Heron (2019) suggested that personal tutors could take a role in being curious about a student's socio-cultural experiences and supporting them where appropriate. The suggestion is that there perhaps requires some boundaries and clear communication in relation to managing student expectations. This may have lacked at times during the COVID-19 pandemic but it is difficult to draw the line as to where the responsibilities of universities begin and end. In recent times, universities have been criticised for not providing enough support to students or informing parents of struggles their children may be encountering. Conversely, Government has a responsibility to appropriately fund support services and students have a right to privacy and confidentiality. There seems to be a challenging debate to be had about the responsibilities of universities alongside conversations relating to managing expectations and effectively communicating with students. What would help this debate is if universities could begin to outline and be transparent about what they view their duty of care to students is.

5.7 Setting realistic expectations for future students

Given the prospect of further pandemics, if they are not doing so already, it would likely be helpful for universities to begin planning for how they can meet the expectations and needs of students in the future. This study demonstrated that students have high expectations and hopes for the social and cultural life they believe going to university brings them. Universities can certainly play a role in these expectations becoming a reality given the importance of social connection, being able to connect with people from the same community and cultural freedom. Although this is an idea that some universities embrace, Heron (2019) advocated for universities designing in opportunities that would allow students to develop blossoming friendships. In their paper, it was suggested that students could be grouped in halls of residence based upon their personality or interests. Perhaps this could even extend to sexual or gender identity, given that one can already access private rental accommodation that is exclusively of LGBTQ+ occupiers. Heron (2019) also suggested that university staff could group returning students into classes which would provide the optimum opportunity for students to develop relationships with others.

The divergence between student expectations and actual experiences seems to be a long running issue that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a serious issue to address for a number of reasons, particularly to support the mental health of students. As was understood from the analysis of the interviews, Money et al (2017) suggested that the divergence between student expectation and reality can lead to students struggling with their well-being, effecting their engagement with their education. Expectations and experiences being greater aligned could potentially provide greater support to the mental well-being of students and bolster academic retention rates (Hassel & Ridout, 2018).

5.8 Mental health of students

The analysis of the research data finds that students had many challenging experiences whilst at university during the pandemic. The social and cultural environment that they had expected did not come to fruition unlike for those students before them. For example, a 2017 paper by Money et al revealed that on the whole, students had a positive experience of university life. Such positives included expectations being fulfilled with regards to the development of the social self and education related goals. Although engaging

with their education is important to students, Ahn and David (2019) noted that students will often place greater meaning upon other aspects of university life, including social and cultural experiences. Ahn and David (2019) discovered that students view their life at university as a place where social connections can flourish, identities can be expressed and new cultural and value based experiences can be engaged with. As a result, it was suggested that these experiences fuel students' sense of belonging to their institutions, community and to the stage they are at in their personal development.

In an earlier 2013 study, Nedelson et al (2013) also found that in the main students have a positive experience of all aspects of university life, however stated that there are many students who will encounter countless challenges especially if expectations of university and the reality are misaligned. Students, particularly those from minority groups, are also disproportionately affected by mental health difficulties and so nurturing mental well-being is a huge challenge for these students. As discussed above, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic meant existing difficulties were further exacerbated. Amongst other consequences, Evans et al (2021) described the COVID-19 pandemic as an event that had profound cultural and social effects. Although the situation eventually improved, at the height of the pandemic the participants of this study were sad and disappointed at the limited social and cultural experiences that transpired during their first year of study. For some of these participants, the lack of social connection, bonding and cultural experiences led to the worsening of their mental health. Reports by Savage et al and Evans et al in 2021 shined a spotlight upon the deteriorating mental health of students during the pandemic. Although students were found to be attempting ways to adapt to the situation, self-reported depression and anxiety levels rose alongside an increase in sedentary behaviour. Research by Appleby et al (2022) as well as Chen and Lucock (2022) were able to link the increased mental health difficulties of students in part due to the loss of cultural and social experiences which were found to be an important part of the university environment. This included the inability to engage with student societies, develop social connections within the classroom and engage with hobbies. The findings of these research projects appear to provide further evidence to how mental health difficulties were in part a consequence of a limited socio-cultural environment.

The literature review of this thesis also focusses upon the disproportionate challenges that LGBTQ+ young people encounter in society. Haworth (2021) suggested that these included challenges relating to housing, finances, employment, and mental health. As

previously mentioned, this pre-pandemic situation left LGBTQ+ people at great risk of being left behind and not appropriately supported. This is especially so as many LGBTQ+ students would not have had access to LGBTQ+ affirming environments, cultural spaces, little specialised support and face the prospect of returning home to unsupportive care givers (Gonzales et al, 2020). Salerno et al's (2021) claim that LGBTQ+ people experienced a compounding effect of difficult events appears to be valid. All students encountered challenges; however, it is important to recognise that there are groups in society that are disproportionately effected by the issues we may face as human beings. This previous research reflects the realities of many of the participants of this study. Given the challenges to their mental well-being, it seemed important for participants to access formal support as well as other approaches when caring for their well-being.

5.9 A perceived lack of formal support

At a time of need, many of the participants of this study felt let down by the formal support networks they attempted to access. Participants encountered long waiting list for student counselling services and some felt their mental health worries were not listened to by teaching staff. The limited support for well-being by universities was compounded by poor communication for some students. One participant spoke of an occasional "self-care" email whilst another spoke of her anger that a university Instagram post was encouraging students to view the lockdown measures as similar to a spa break. A third participant stated that they had contacted university counselling services a number of times but his calls for help were not answered. Not only does this situation highlight the potential risks associated to students' mental health not being taken seriously, but these examples demonstrate the lack of appropriately funded services to support LGBTQ+ students and further evidence for some participants' perspective that their institution did not care for them. Participants of this study are essentially calling for better equipped, efficient, formal support services that go beyond the provision of self-help advice that many students already have the knowledge to discover. Universities have the opportunity to use the skills of counselling psychologists and other practitioners to develop student mental health services that are the envy of the world. Sadly though, mental health services have long been underfunded at universities as well as within the UK National Health Service. Many students encountered what can only be considered

shop window support: claims that support is plentiful yet the reality behind this is very different. Regardless of if there is another pandemic within the next hundred years or not, the evidence is stark as to why further funding and expanding of services is required. However, further funding may not be all that is needed. Reeves (2017) argued that counselling services have a responsibility to understand the nature of the institution that they are serving. By doing so, Reeves (2017) stated that a service will be well placed to develop a support structure that suits the clients and institution that it serves.

Separately, some participants spoke of the lack of social and cultural experiences that could have been accessed online to support their well-being. There was a hope expressed their university or student union societies would host more online webinars or activities. Such an idea could be helpful to consider if universities seek to develop a future crisis response plan. Despite these varying calls for improvements, it is not to say that some students did not receive any formal support from university counselling services. Some of the participants of this study had a positive experience and were able to access counselling sessions remotely. Gonzales et al (2020) suggested that universities should continue to offer remote therapy sessions for students with flexible hours to account for differing student routines. Additionally, it was suggested that there could be identity based online affinity groups in order to support LGBTQ+ students to develop a sense of community in the absence of in person socialising. Gonzales et al (2020) proposed that universities could make greater efforts to support LGBTQ+ students who believed it may have been unsafe to return to their home during the pandemic. This support could have taken the form of a digital space utilising community or national LGBTQ+ resources as well as specific financial or accommodation support to ensure students can remain safe. These ideas could be considered by universities moving forward when (hopefully) developing a crisis plan for future pandemics or other national emergencies. Counselling psychologists who are passionate about working with and improving the experiences of students could play a role in supporting institutions in the development of such crisis planning.

5.10 Barriers to support

Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, and Sasangohar (2020) found in their study that students encountered a number of barriers to accessing counselling services during the pandemic. These included a fear of being judged due to mental health difficulties as well as there being a lack of culturally specific support, for example, for LGBTQ+ students. Haworth (2021) noted that although experiences are different for every LGBTQ+ person, greater efforts could be made within society to provide targeted care and well-being support for all LGBTQ+ people. In Haworth's report, alongside a call for substantial increases in funding for mental health services, they call for institutions to take responsibility for understanding the needs and lives of LGBTQ+ people. Advanced training for service providers, plans for how to deliver flexible services in a crisis and improving the efficiency, funding and reach of current LGBTQ+ support services were all suggested as ways to help the LGBTQ+ community. Laville, Field and Hart (2020) shared that in addition to the enhancing of specific LGBTQ+ support, students called for more information and signposting to internal and external LGBTQ+ support services. They reported that a concern of LGBTQ+ students was that support services will not understand LGBTQ+ considerations and so enhanced training and visibility of the support for the community would be helpful. A participant of this study shared that they too believed that support services could have advertised and shared more information about what could be offered. This same participant also commented that the counselling service of his university could have also been made more approachable. One way to do this could be to revisit the marketing strategy of the department but also to signal to students that, for example, the department supports and welcomes LGBTQ+ people.

5.11 Self-management of well-being

There is a wealth of research that calls for increased availability of mental health services for students as well as specific support to help groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. However, there is a recognition that there may be other ways in which a student can support their well-being too. Participants of this study spoke of taking advantage of the one walk allowed per day during the lockdown to have some social connection or by spending time with their flat mates in communal areas. Some spoke of struggling with flat mates and so either moved apartments or returned home to support their mental health and increase opportunity for connection with others. The experiences of these participants

demonstrate Heron's (2019) point that there is great power in relationships with others. The care and warmth that can exist within human connections is perhaps what is central to a positive experience at university. Sadly, not all students interviewed experienced this but nonetheless this phenomenon holds up the idea that university is more than a place of learning but a unique opportunity for a person to develop their social self which is fundamental to healthy well-being.

Despite all of the challenges, for a number of participants the pandemic actually accelerated a sense of community and bonding. Some participants spoke of being able to develop deep and rich bonds with those immediately around them which they speculated may not have occurred if it had not been for the pandemic. Additionally, one participant stated that the social restrictions ultimately aided him to combat his natural shyness and lack of confidence because if he had not made connections with those he lives with, he knew his mental health would suffer. During the interview process, one was given the sense that the need to belong and a desire to develop social identity was a priority for participants. Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) stated that such personal development is important for student mental health and academic engagement, especially for first year students transitioning to higher education whilst loosening ties to formative social networks (Tice et al, 2021). Creating these bonds and developing the social self was made difficult due to remote learning as students were not given the opportunity to meet a wide range of people from different backgrounds nor develop ideal relationships with teaching staff. This was a disappointment to many participants and appeared to contribute to a declining sense of belonging (Tice et al, 2021). Participants of this study therefore appeared to do all they could to develop bonds with others that ultimately was a support for their mental health. Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) found in their study that in person teaching was overwhelmingly preferred by students. The findings of this study concurs with this but some participants were not opposed to the idea of blended learning methods moving forward. I write at a time when there is a call to cease the blend of online and in person working by some. However, universities have an opportunity to consult with students to establish how a blended learning approach could work for them and how this could be helpful for their mental health as well as socio-cultural experiences. Blended learning approaches could give flexibility to students that would allow them to be able to engage with social or cultural interests. It also may be helpful to neurodiverse students who may gain benefit, for example, from being able to stop and pause video recorded lectures. Further learning from student experiences and views would be helpful so that

universities can take helpful learning from the COVID-19 pandemic to improve the experiences of all students.

5.12 The importance of LGBTQ+ communities and spaces

As previously mentioned, Formby (2015) and Greenwood (2016) highlighted that there has been little research that has explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ university students. This pool of research is growing and it is hoped that this thesis can contribute to the growing knowledge base, particularly due to its focus upon the socio-cultural expectations and experiences. Existing research will inform readers that for many years, LGBTQ+ university students have encountered a hostile environment on campus where discrimination, prejudice, and queerphobic bullying has been rife (Formby, 2017). This is particularly true for the trans+ community (O’Riordan et al, 2019). Formby (2015) argued that it is important to develop an awareness of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students due to the consequences these difficult experiences can have, for example, deteriorating mental health, social isolation, and reduced sense of belonging. The 2021 Stonewall report does paint a more hopeful picture for LGBTQ+ students, however it also identified that there were still a large proportion of LGBTQ+ students who experienced challenges on campus. A cause of this is arguably the tyranny of heteronormativity and cisnormativity that bolsters power and oppression over LGBTQ+ people and so university campuses are naturally not immune from this (Formby 2017; Mearns et al, 2020).

Despite the various challenges that LGBTQ+ students encounter, the findings of this research project validate the importance of LGBTQ+ communities and spaces to students. Despite COVID-19 restrictions limiting social and cultural experiences for participants, some participants were able to establish safe affirming spaces, which was helped by heterosexual allies. Participants expressed their happiness that in the most part they were able to be in an environment that was validating, friendly, liberal, and supportive. A number of participants felt supported by their heterosexual flat mates, commenting that they were able to be in a space that was without judgement. For many participants, a safe space was also provided because they were able to develop connections with fellow LGBTQ+ people. This was valuable for participants for a number of reasons, including that these social connections

provided an environment in which individual identities could be expressed. Finding these connections with other LGBTQ+ people, for some participants for the first time, was an enlightening and transformational experience. Being able to bond and relate to another LGBTQ+ person about shared experiences and a shared culture was identity affirming for the students. These varying connections provided comfort and support for participants' well-being during a time of great challenge for the world. One participant reported that being able to connect to other LGBTQ+ people was important for his ability to cope given the social restrictions in place at the time.

Some participants were able to develop a safe community of people around them either by chance, by engaging with flat mates or by attending LGBTQ+ society events. However, some participants used social media to be able to find these safe spaces. One participant used social media to find other queer Muslim students that she could develop a shared social and cultural connection with. This participant was not able to express her identity within her own household, so being able to find this virtual LGBTQ+ community was incredibly helpful for her well-being. Falconer and Taylor (2016) stated that universities can provide environments where LGBTQ+ identities can be explored alongside a student's religion. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the student mentioned above was not able to do this and it is social media that appears to have helped her explore intersecting identities. This illustrates the importance of LGBTQ+ spaces whether they be physical, psychological, or virtual. The positive experiences noted by participants support the findings of Ceatha et al (2019) and Walter et al (2019) who emphasised the importance of the development of group identity and social bonding. It is suggested that the development of an ingroup identity supports the development of an individual's sense of self, well-being, and acceptance of their identities. In their study, Ceatha et al (2019) found that the development of a group identity meant a safe space was created where group members formed a buffer against the effects of minority stress and could be supported to circumnavigate hetero-cis-normative assumptions and environments (Ceatha et al, 2019). Morris (2018) also supported the idea that LGBTQ+ spaces and the development of a community is important to well-being, personal growth, and identity formation. Morris (2018) claimed that the creation of a community and the opportunity to connect with a diverse range of LGBTQ+ peers was pivotal to LGBTQ+ people developing a helpful understanding of themselves.

5.13 A hostile campus culture?

It was only in 2018 that Stonewall expressed concern for the culture of university campuses, citing that some trans students continued to be called by their former name and that some LGBTQ+ students received negative comments from staff relating to their identity. Although a minority of participants in this study reported discrimination or abuse, I wonder if in some ways the COVID-19 pandemic put a sticking plaster over a hostile campus environment due to the lack of social mixing. One participant did recall a time when a friend was frequently misgendered at a university workshop about inclusivity. The irony of this situation demonstrates that training about the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ people could be improved. Moreover, perhaps there are much wider and bigger structural changes that could be considered in order to challenge the hetero-cis-normativity that can be in part blamed for such incidents. Formby (2017) and Stonewall (2021) suggested a variety of ways in which hetero-cis-normative structures could be challenged including: developing inclusive LGBTQ+ curriculums across departments; reducing the portrayal of LGBTQ+ students as being in need; providing gender neutral services; and enhancing inclusivity training. In order to challenge the institutional structures that have been built upon the foundations of a hetero-cis-normative world, Allen et al (2019) agreed with the above suggestions, however stated that universities need to go beyond surface level change. It is argued that change should be solidified, that inclusive policies need to be developed and that these should be effectively enforced. Rather than universities flying a rainbow flag for one week of the year, visible and meaningful action that supports the rights of LGBTQ+ people and a commitment to improving the student experience is the very least universities can do. Amongst a number of suggestions, Allen et al (2019) also proposed that what will really entrench a safe and validating university culture is: for students to see permanent rainbow sections in libraries; LGBTQ+ counsellors; and queer staff members provided an environment where they can be role models and not in their post due to equity concessions. More frequent assessment of the experiences of LGBTQ+ university students would also likely help to understand and address the needs of this population, therefore improving their social, cultural, and learning environment (Marzetti, 2018). Tetreault et al (2013) suggested that developing and understanding of the complex relations of student experiences, their perceptions of university and the impact of their experiences is important so that learning can be obtained to create an environment where LGBTQ+ students can thrive. What is described above paints an exciting

opportunity for a counselling psychologist who is interested in social justice research and supporting the improved experiences of LGBTQ+ students within UK universities. Minority groups such as the LGBTQ+ community continue to encounter inequalities. Counselling psychologists, considered by some as leaders who may hold relative power in society to tackle social injustices, therefore have an opportunity to use their skills to combat oppression and power imbalances. Winter (2019) emphasised the role counselling psychologists can play in working towards equality, minimising power imbalances and challenging discrimination and oppression. Winter (2019) described social justice matters as “particularly important for our profession” (p. 4). Many other counselling psychologist agree with this and deem it their duty to highlight inequalities and amplify the voices of minoritised people. Of course, there is a fine balance between patronising charity and social justice, however at a time of rising hate towards the LGBTQ+ (particularly trans) community, the support from leaders within society is certainly welcomed by vast swathes of the community I am a part of.

Glazzard et al (2020) learned in their study that those LGBTQ+ students who had a positive experience at university noted that the experience contributed to their overall personal development. Two of the main reasons for the positive experience was that of the opportunity to develop and maintain new relationships with fellow LGBTQ+ people but also because there was the freedom to develop and express differing LGBTQ+ identities. These findings further emphasise the importance of LGBTQ+ spaces and communities to the well-being of students. Glazzard et al (2020) went on to argue that reported negative experiences were not a barrier for the growth LGBTQ+ students experienced. In a way, this supports Allen et al’s (2020) point that university campuses can be simultaneously safe and unsafe. Some of the participants in this study experienced abuse yet many did not report any and found they had positive social and cultural experiences despite difficult circumstances. Two participants mentioned they were grateful for their student union LGBTQ+ society continuing to operate and offer social support. The societies that they were a part of gave the opportunity for online connections to develop before eventually being allowed to meet in person. The ability to create these virtual spaces appears to be a consistent positive in amongst the gloom as students were able to maintain some form of helpful social and cultural environment. However, for some participants, it was felt that their student union and LGBTQ+ society could have done more to support LGBTQ+ people, one participant stating that their society did very little to hold a safe place for LGBTQ+ students. Moving forward, it would seem important for universities and student unions to enhance their support for these societies as

they provide a great deal of social connection, support, and power to allow students to express themselves in the way that they would like. Understandably as they are student run, some LGBTQ+ societies struggled to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic and additional support in future would be helpful.

5.14 COVID-19 a barrier to LGBTQ+ connections

Sadly, some participants struggled to engage with other LGBTQ+ people during the pandemic. This may have been due to social restrictions preventing queer spaces to be accessible, a lack of activity from LGBTQ+ societies or due to living in an environment where not one other person openly identified within the community. This was a challenging and isolating experience for some students, Haworth (2021) describing the impact of COVID-19 restrictions upon LGBTQ+ people as significant. He adds that LGBTQ+ people did not have access to support groups, Pride events and other arenas that would have allowed LGBTQ+ people to express their culture.

The pandemic amplified the importance of the LGBTQ+ community and safe spaces for students. Despite the circumstances, many of the participants were able to reside in safe and identity affirming homes, develop connections with LGBTQ+ people and find different ways to engage and express their individual culture. However, a number of students encountered challenges ranging from abuse to feeling like they had little support. Some of the issues that caused negative experiences for the participants of this study are not unique to the COVID era. There are issues that are longstanding that can create a difficult socio-cultural environment for LGBTQ+ students. A whole-institutional approach to LGBTQ+ inclusion could perhaps help to address problematic hetero-cis-normativity within academic institutions (Glazzard et al, 2020). The 2021 report and recommendations by Stonewall (some of which are described above) could be helpful start for institutions to establish more inclusive university environments.

5.15 Review of the methodology – Strengths and limitation of the

study

At the time of writing, this study explored an area of research that was yet to mature. A real strength of the study was to focus upon the lives of LGBTQ+ students, particularly the socio-cultural expectations and experiences they had around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research appeared to be the first that focussed upon this specific area of a student's life whereas other research mainly focussed upon academic and mental health experiences. By exploring in greater depth, the socio-cultural expectations, and experiences of this group, we were able to respond to the research gap and further our knowledge of what was happening for students during this difficult time in their lives. Developing an understanding of student experiences can ultimately support needs and difficulties to be addressed. I believe a further strength of the research to be the embracing of a qualitative approach. A review of literature uncovered a great many quantitative or mixed method research studies; thus, I believe a purely qualitative approach has led to richer data and a greater chance of being able to amplify the voices of students.

As mentioned, a strength of this study was its focus upon the LGBTQ+ community. This thesis has acknowledged the relatively small pool of research that has attempted to develop an understanding of LGBTQ+ university students' experiences in times gone by. Developing a greater awareness of the experiences and needs of differing student populations could allow institutions to develop what they can offer students and improve the overall student experience. Primarily for LGBTQ+ students, a safe and inclusive educational setting is what would allow this population to excel, yet it is understood that university campuses continue to be challenging places for the LGBTQ+ community. As this thesis does, further gathering of data about the challenges students encounter and understanding how these challenges can be overcome could lead to invaluable insights into how experiences for students could be improved.

The research recognises the importance of universities involving students within decision making and all students being given the opportunity to contribute to the discussions relating to their environment and needs. However, this research could have been enhanced further by increased participant numbers and by recruiting participants from differing social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Although participants did not describe themselves in this

way, it appeared that all but one participant was white and only one participant stated that they were born outside of the UK. The involvement of participants from broader backgrounds could have provided greater richness to the data, potentially uncovering issues and experiences not addressed in this research. Additionally, transcribed interviews and the analysis of the data could have been checked with participants. This could have aided to further build the trustworthiness of the research and provide clarity to any potential misinterpretations. I have also wondered whether it would have been helpful to have conducted the research whilst the participants were still in their first year of university or when they had finished their studies. Adopting a longitudinal design may have helped to harvest views at different stages of a participant's life. However, it was not possible to conduct the research project at an earlier or later time due to a variety of practical reason.

5.16 Reflexive positioning

My experience of conducting this research has been positive, without a doubt contributing to my personal and professional development. Despite beginning the process during a pandemic and all of the challenges that come with this, I was excited to learn about the experiences of other students and to contribute to the literature in some way. I have always been passionate about listening to the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in particular and to find ways to support them in any way I can.

This research project aimed to develop an understanding of the subjective experiences of the participants; however, I recognise that it can be very difficult to separate the views and experiences of participant from the researcher. For example, my own experience with the university teaching team and their communication with me during the height of the pandemic was overwhelmingly positive. I always felt supported and listened to, staff often going above and beyond to assist where they could. This experience is at odds with some of the participants and at times I wondered if participants were providing a fair and empathic view of their university teaching team. This is an example of when it was incredibly important to take a reflexive and reflective approach to the generated data in an attempt to lessen my influence upon the data analysis. Nonetheless, I was compassionate towards myself and I recognised the generated meanings from the interview data will always

be co-constructed. I think I was sometimes overly worried about my influence upon the data analysis, this becoming a barrier in itself at times. Some may say that it is a positive that I was mindful of the influence that I could have, however at times I felt it was a barrier because I would constantly second guess myself and this may have led to procrastination. Engaging with the reflexive diary, research supervision and taking regular breaks from data analysis really helped me to manage my own emotions and experiences.

Throughout the research process, I have always aimed to be transparent about the personal and professional experiences that may influence my perspective. I have used research supervision to express my experiences as well as a reflexive journal. Both of these outlets have aided me to understand the biases, assumptions, and preconceptions that I may hold and how this may influence my engagement with the research data. Developing an awareness of my own positioning and views has allowed me to embed my reflexive process within the writing of this thesis. Consequently, this awareness development has aided me to appreciate that this thesis may embrace perspectives that some may disagree with. I acknowledge that some who work within academia will not agree with the importance I have placed upon the socio-cultural environments of university life. I acknowledge that my own expectations and experiences of university life have influenced the direction of this research project. As previously mentioned, the experiences that I encountered during my own undergraduate degree were truly transformational. Attending university allowed me to embrace new social and cultural experiences aiding me to improve my confidence, develop the social self and encourage the accepting of my identities. Without university, my life would not be what it is today, however this is not an unusual story. As the literature review has outlined, attending university is a life changing experience for many LGBTQ+ people. Given the significance of university socio-cultural experiences alongside academic work, I hope that university leadership teams and staff members can consider how they could play a role in providing supportive and inclusive environments that help students to embrace the experiences that are most important to them.

I was humbled to listen to the expectations and experiences that students had of the socio-cultural environment of their university life. However, I was able to identify existing beliefs and assumptions influencing my perspective at the beginning of the research process. For example, I acknowledged that I had the preconceived idea that the COVID-19 pandemic must have been difficult for all of the participants, completely overshadowing any good that

could have come from a difficult time for the world. I think such a view was misguided although helpful to recognise when developing interview questions and engaging with the data collection process. I could have been drawn to an interview schedule that was skewed to exploring what had not gone well. By acknowledging preconceptions as the one outlined above, I was guided to a more helpful approach. A further example of a preconceived idea was that participants would talk favourably of remote learning and the flexibility that this learning method could provide. Although for many reasons attending remote lectures and seminars were challenging, I personally found the experience to be positive overall. I believe this was in part due to how quickly my course adapted to the situation and that I was fortunate enough to make connections with my peers in person before the pandemic emerged. When beginning the interviews with the participants of this study, I quickly learned that their experiences were very different to mine and this was a shock at first. I was shocked at the approaches some of their courses had taken, the allegations of unsupportive teaching staff and how this has made the participants feel. Learning of these different experiences and recognising my own emotions was important to acknowledge and note within my reflexive diary. I quickly acknowledged that I had a growing affiliation with the student participants and so it was helpful to be wary of these experiences and how they could influence the analysis process. I reminded myself that I was not a psychologist forming a therapeutic relationship or alliance with the participants but in fact a researcher who needed to be as much an impartial observer of their experiences as possible.

5.17 Recommendations and future research

Exploring the socio-cultural expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ first year undergraduate students has enabled a number of recommendations to be generated that may help to support students in the future. Notably, it would appear that greater efforts to improve the communication between university institutions, staff and students could be made. Clearer boundaries of the roles and responsibilities of universities and staff members may support students to have appropriate expectations of their university experiences. Furthermore, consistent, considered, and informative communicating with students may play a role in supporting the mental well-being of students. An enhanced approach to communicating with students may form part of a crisis response strategy that could be helpful in the event of

further pandemics or national crises. Given their interest in social justice matters as well as promoting healthy well-being, counselling psychologist could be in a prime position to support the development of a crisis response strategy. Developing a comprehensive plan supported by the learning obtained during the COVID-19 pandemic could provide universities with an opportunity to support and meet the psychological, academic, social, and cultural needs when future monumental events occur. Counselling psychologist could be best placed to be involved in such policy development given their embracing of a humanistic value base which recognises the uniqueness and potential of human beings (Milton, 2010). This supports the perspective that has long emphasised that human beings should be viewed as a whole rather than composed of individual parts (Bjoroy, Madigan, & Nylund, 2015). The empathy, compassion, and care for a just society that counselling psychologist embrace could therefore support policy makers within universities to develop a crisis response strategy that takes into the account the differing needs and experiences of student communities.

Whilst the development of a crisis response strategy may be helpful, universities could also consider making changes now that may improve the social and cultural experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Increased or effective use of funding could be directed towards developing specific LGBTQ+ support, employment of LGBTQ+ counsellors, online support networks and support for LGBTQ+ student union societies. Alongside this, consideration could be made as to how to break down the superiority of hetero-cis-normative environments endemic within university campuses. Efforts could be made to develop more inclusive curriculums; university spaces; and training for staff that will help them greater understand the needs of LGBTQ+ communities. All of the above may help to improve the socio-cultural environment for LGBTQ+ students at university and play a role in supporting their overall well-being.

Future research is required in order to develop our understanding of LGBTQ+ students' expectations and experiences of university life, particularly in relation to the socio-cultural environment. As previously discussed, the pool of research exploring the experiences of this population is small and there have been constant calls for more consistent monitoring of the needs of LGBTQ+ students. Further research could aim to further amplify the voices of students and provide vital information about how the above recommendations could be implemented in a way that best works for them. Research that takes advantage of various research designs and methods would strengthen the richness and reliability of the findings,

however further qualitative approaches could prove useful in terms of navigating the detail of future crisis planning and improving the overall experience of the university socio-cultural environment.

Additionally, further research could seek to explore the expectations and experiences of students within the individual communities of the LGBTQ+ population. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the experiences of the LGB population will be different to those who identify as trans. Similarly, a gay man's experience will not be the same to those of a bisexual woman. Further research could investigate the nuanced experiences of these individual communities that could further support institutions to understand the needs of different student groups. Furthermore, future research could investigate how LGBTQ+ students from different cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds experience university life, whether that be related to the socio-cultural environment or not. Greater diversity amongst participants could aid in enhancing the richness of the data and our understanding of student lives.

5.18 Chapter Summary

An examination of the literature alongside the findings of this research project has demonstrated that LGBTQ+ students were confronted with a variety of challenges, some of which precede the COVID-19 pandemic but were exacerbated by this world event. Students appeared to have high hopes of the university socio-cultural environment, yet expectations were met with disappointment. The COVID-19 pandemic changed lives beyond measure but this study calls into question the roles of universities and how they may have not set realistic expectations for students. This discussion has also recognised the effects of social restrictions upon the mental well-being of students and the challenges many experienced in relation to seeking formal support. Positive experiences are acknowledged; however, recommendations are proposed as to how universities could support LGBTQ+ students effectively in the future.

Furthermore, this discussion has illustrated the importance of LGBTQ+ spaces and communities in supporting the well-being of students as well as the providing of an environment in which LGBTQ+ students can safely express their sexual and gender identities. To an extent, the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions interrupted the

ability of students to engage with these spaces and peers. Recommendations have been made as to how LGBTQ+ students could be supported within university spaces and the importance of a whole institution approach is emphasised.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Research relating to the expectations and experiences of university students has been growing in recent decades, however the pool of research exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ students has remained quite small. Previous research has focussed upon the mental health or discrimination that LGBTQ+ students have encountered, with socio-cultural experiences explored in less depth. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shockwaves that this sent through the social and cultural experiences of us all prompted the birth of this research project alongside a concern for the well-being of LGBTQ+ first year undergraduates. Literature was reviewed that detailed the differing motivations and expectations that students have for their university life. Attending university for the first time can be an incredibly exciting experience for students and past research recognises the significance of such an event. Students may apply greater meaning to their university experience, viewing it as more than a place to learn but one where, for example, friendships and identities may develop. This is true for LGBTQ+ students, however the research also recognises that this community of students can encounter numerous challenges. University campuses have been accused of having hostile campus environments and not providing adequate, specialised, support for LGBTQ+ people. It is of no surprise to learn therefore that LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately affected by mental health difficulties. This was only fuelled further by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of socio-cultural experiences that are important to the lives of us all.

The aim of this thesis was to develop an understanding of the expectations and experiences that students had of their university socio-cultural environment. The student recruited ten, first year undergraduate, who identified within the LGBTQ+ community. Each participants were invited to a semi-structured interview which led to the generation of data that was subsequently analysed with reflexive thematic analysis. With a constructivist-interpretivist lens, the data was analysed leading to the generation of themes. In supporting of this analysis process, the trustworthiness and quality of this research was reinforced by applying the guidelines set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Braun and Clarke (2022).

Six themes were generated from the analysis that provided an insight into the expectations and experiences that LGBTQ+ participants had. For the participants of this research, expectations relating to a flourishing social and cultural life appeared high. This was understandable as university is often viewed as a place that can provide unique social and cultural experiences, supporting students to develop their sense of self and identities. The consequences of expectations not meeting reality due to social restrictions seemed huge. Students encountered a sense of loss in relation to learning as well as social and cultural experiences. Additionally, there was a disappointment and anger at a perceived lack of support and guidance from institutions which contributed to worsening of well-being. Many participants felt that their well-being had deteriorated due to the consequences of the pandemic and it was a struggle to access formal support. However, it was identified that the pandemic encouraged a sense of community and bonding between students and that other methods of support were engaged with. It was also demonstrated that LGBTQ+ communities and spaces were of great importance to participants. Given limited opportunity due to social restrictions, students took different approaches to engaging with the safe and warm environments that suited their needs.

Whilst discussing the findings of this research project with the reviewed literature, it was identified that reducing the gap between student expectations and actual experiences would be helpful to the well-being, academic success, and retention of students. Additionally, the findings of this study support previous research by asserting that university is more than a place to learn about a particular topic. University provides a rich opportunity for students to have varied social and cultural experiences that promote the development of identities and the social self. Moreover, the themes demonstrated the importance of social and cultural experiences for the mental well-being of students and the dire consequences when these are inhibited. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ spaces and communities are proved to be fundamental to well-being, personal growth, social bonding, and expression of identity. The responsibility of universities to protect and enhance these spaces are therefore emphasised.

This research has contributed to the knowledge base regarding socio-cultural expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ university students. Developing an understanding of the perspectives and lived experiences of specific population is important as it can enable institutions and other interested parties to take steps to appropriately support LGBTQ+

students whilst they undertake higher education. The findings of this thesis have led to the generation of recommendations and suggestions have been made for the direction of further research. A call is made for universities to take more of an active approach to enhance the social, cultural, and academic experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Taking some responsibility for this would hopefully contribute to the improvement of LGBTQ+ student mental well-being. Enhancements to communications methods and styles are recommended alongside a whole institution approach to dismantling campus hetero-cis-normativity. Furthermore, this thesis calls for universities to develop a crisis response strategy that takes into consideration the social and cultural needs of students when a national crisis, including a future pandemic, rocks the world once again.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview schedule



Interview schedule

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. As you may already be aware, we are interested in exploring your experiences of University life across your first academic year.

We have a particular interest in your expectations and actual experiences of the University socio-cultural environment as an LGBT+ identifying person. For this interview, the socio-cultural environment refers to the social and culture experiences that you may encounter during your time as an undergraduate student.

We have some questions to ask you about your expectations and experiences of the last academic year. At the end of this interview, you will of course be able to add anything that you think is relevant.

As you may remember, we are going to audio record the session which will later be transcribed. I will not use any of your identifiable information during the write up of this research project, **therefore I am wondering if you have a preferred pseudonym I could call you by?**

As we want the research to be completely anonymous, I also kindly ask that you refrain from mentioning the names of anyone you know, University staff, the University you go to and the town/city you live in. If you do say anything that is identifiable, please do not worry. I will anonymise all information that I am in possession of.

How does that sound?

Do you have any questions before we start recording?

(Confirm that recording has started).

Interview Questions:

My first questions are about your expectations of the socio-cultural life of University prior to this academic year.

- **An aim of the research project is to learn about how University students may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. What were your thoughts about going to University before the pandemic started?**
- **What were your expectations of the socio-cultural environment of University prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- **Before starting this academic year, the COVID-19 pandemic had been effecting the UK for many months. Knowing this, what were your expectations of the socio-cultural University environment prior to starting your course?**

The next questions are about your experiences of the University socio-cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **What has been your experiences of University life over the academic year? I am particularly interested in the socio-cultural environment you may have encountered.**
- **You mentioned a number of expectations for your first year at University. Were these expectations met in any way?**
- **What have your experiences been of remote learning?**
- **What have you found most challenging as a first year undergraduate during the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- **What have you been doing to counteract these challenges you have faced?**
- **What have you found to be good about the University socio-cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Closing:

- **Is there anything else you would like to add that you think is relevant?**

Thank you for spending the time to talk to me today about your experiences.

Before we finish and if you are able to, I wonder if you could tell me how you would capture and/or describe yourself as a person?

This may refer to your race, religion, sexual orientation, gender etc. however it does not need to include any of these aspects. It is up to you how you would describe yourself.

(May give an example if the participant struggles with this, however they are not required to answer this question).

Additional prompting questions:

- **What do you mean by that?**
- **Can you tell me a little bit more about that?**
- **Could you give me an example?**
- **What did you make of that?**
- **What made that part of the experience interesting / challenging?**
- **Were the expectations you described earlier met?**

Appendix 2 – Participant recruitment leaflet



MANCHESTER
1824
The University of Manchester



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Have you been a 1st year undergraduate student during the 2020 – 2021 academic year?

Do you also identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community?

If so, you are invited to take part in an interview to explore your expectations and experiences of the socio-cultural environment associated with University life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interested in taking part?

Please email researcher, Robert Parkes, for further information at:

Robert.parkes@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

We look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix 3 – Participant information sheet



COVID-19 and the University socio-cultural environment: An exploration of the expectations and experiences of LGBT+ identifying first year undergraduate students.

Participant Information Sheet (PIS)

You are being invited to take part in a research study that seeks to explore your expectations and experiences of the University socio-cultural environment in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully before deciding whether to take part and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

About the research

➤ Who will conduct the research?

Robert Parkes, trainee counselling psychologist, will conduct the research supported by a supervisory team within The School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester.

➤ What is the purpose of the research?

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, I am seeking to explore the experiences of participants with regards to the socio-cultural environment that may be a part of University life. I also hope to explore the expectations of this environment before the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the socio-cultural environment refers to the social and cultural experiences that may occur when attending University as a first year undergraduate.

I intend to recruit up to 20 participants who identify as part of the LGBT+ community and who have been a first year undergraduate during the 2020-2021 academic year.

➤ Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research is part of a student thesis and will be published. The thesis will be published online and available through The University of Manchester library. The research may also be published in an academic journal and presented at conferences. Participant contributions will be made anonymous before any publication

➤ Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check

The researcher has had the appropriate level of DBS check conducted by The University of Manchester.

Who has reviewed the research project?

The project has been reviewed by The University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee and permission to conduct the project has been approved.

What would my involvement be?

➤ What would I be asked to do if I took part?

Participants will be invited to a 45 – 60-minute interview that will aim to explore the expectations and experiences of the socio-cultural environment associated with University life. As interviews will be conducted remotely, a consent form will be provided prior to the interview along with the participant information sheet. Participants will be asked to electronically sign the consent form with an electronic signature and return this to me via the University email system. If it is not possible to use an electronic signature, participants can type their name. Once the consent form is downloaded, encrypted and uploaded to a secure server, participant emails will be deleted.

The consent form will be checked at the beginning of the interview so that the interview can take place. The interview will be audio recorded using Zoom and will be encrypted and stored on a secure drive provided by the University. The Zoom account used will be the account provided by the University.

If at any point during the interview a participant becomes distressed, a distress management protocol will be followed.

➤ What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do not wish to take part in the study, you can withdraw from the project at any point. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself. However, it will not be possible to remove your data from the project once it has been anonymised as we will not be able to identify your specific data. This does not affect your data protection rights. If you decide not to take part you do not need to do anything further.

An audio recording (via Zoom) of the interview is essential component of data collection for this project. Participants must feel comfortable with the video/audio recording of the interview and can stop the recording if they feel uncomfortable at any point.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

➤ What information will you collect about me?

In order to participate in this research project, we will need to collect information that could identify you, called “personal identifiable information”. Specifically, we will need to collect:

- Your name and contact details
- Your age
- Course name / area of study
- Ask you to describe what makes up your identity at the end of the interview. This may include describing your gender, sexual orientation, religion or cultural background; however it is for you to decide how you would describe your identity.

For the recording of the interview, your voice will be recorded. You being able to speak privately and confidentially is therefore ideal.

Under what legal basis are you collecting this information?

We are collecting and storing this personal identifiable information in accordance with data protection law which protect your rights. These state that we must have a legal basis (specific reason) for collecting your data. For this study, the specific reason is that it is “a public interest task” and “a process necessary for research purposes”.

➤ **What are my rights in relation to the information you will collect about me?**

You have a number of rights under data protection law regarding personal information. For example, you can request a copy of the information we hold about you, including interview recordings.

If you would like to know more about your different rights or the way we use your personal information to ensure we follow the law, please consult our [Privacy Notice for Research](#).

This can be found at the following web address:

<http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=37095>

➤ **Will my participation in the study be confidential and my personal identifiable information be protected?**

In accordance with data protection law, The University of Manchester is the Data Controller for this project. This means that we are responsible for making sure your personal information is kept secure, confidential and used only in the way you have been told it will be used. All researchers are trained with this in mind, and your data will be looked after in the following way:

- Participants will have an assigned ID number only known to the research team (known as pseudonymised)
- Interview recordings will be uploaded to a secure storage drive provided by The University of Manchester.
- Data will be stored for 5 years after the completion of the study.
- Only the study team at The University of Manchester will have access to the data and this will not be shared with any other institution.
- Consent forms will be encrypted and uploaded to a secure portal. These will be kept until all elements of the research have been completed.

Your participation in this research will be recorded in Zoom and your personal data will be processed by Zoom. This may mean that your personal data is transferred to a country outside of the European Economic Area, some of which have not yet been determined by the United Kingdom to have an adequate level of data protection. Appropriate legal mechanisms to ensure

these transfers are compliant with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation are in place. The recordings will be removed from the above third party platform and stored on University of Manchester managed file storage as soon as possible following the completion of data collection.

Audio recordings:

- The interview recording will be transcribed by the lead researcher as close to the time of the interview as possible.
- Personal identifiable information will be removed from the final transcript.
- The interview recording will be destroyed following transcription in line with the policy and procedures of The University of Manchester.
- The main researcher and supervisor will have access to the interview recording.

Potential disclosures:

- If, during the study, we have concerns about your safety or the safety of others, it may be that I need to discuss this further with Dr Laura Winter (research supervisor). This is in addition to following the distress management plan that would be in place in order to provide support.
- If, during the study, information is disclosed about any current or future illegal activities, we have a legal obligation to report this and will therefore need to inform the relevant authorities.
- Individuals from the University, the site where the research is taking place and regulatory authorities may need to review the study information for auditing and monitoring purposes or in the event of an incident.

Please also note that individuals from The University of Manchester or regulatory authorities may need to look at the data collected for this study to make sure the project is being carried out as planned. This may involve looking at identifiable data. All individuals involved in auditing and monitoring the study will have a strict duty of confidentiality to you as a research participant.

COVID-19 requirements

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, we have made some adjustments to the way in which this research study will be conducted that ensures we are adhering to the latest government advice in relation to social distancing as well as taking all reasonable precautions in terms of limiting the spread of the virus. This study will take place remotely in order to adhere fully to the guidelines surrounding social mixing, however you should carefully consider all of the information provided before deciding if you still want to take part in this research study. If you choose not to take part, you need to inform research team. If you have any additional queries about any of the information provided, please speak with a member of the research team.

What if I have a complaint?

If you have a complaint that you wish to direct to members of the research team, please contact:

Dr Laura Winter

**Senior Lecturer in Education and Counselling Psychology, and HCPC
Registered Counselling Psychologist**

**Ellen Wilkinson Building, A6.14, University of Manchester, Oxford Road,
M13 9PL**

+44 (0)161 275 3432

laura.winter@manchester.ac.uk

If you wish to make a formal complaint to someone independent of the research team or if you are not satisfied with the response you have gained from the researchers in the first instance, then please contact:

The Research Ethics Manager, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, by emailing:

research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk or by telephoning 0161 275 2674.

If you wish to contact us about your data protection rights, please email dataprotection@manchester.ac.uk or write to The Information Governance Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, M13 9PL at the University and we will guide you through the process of exercising your rights.

You also have a right to complain to the [Information Commissioner's Office about complaints relating to your personal identifiable information](#) Tel 0303 123 1113

Contact Details

If you have any queries about the study or if you are interested in taking part then please contact the researcher:

Mr Robert Parkes

Trainee Counselling Psychologist

Ellen Wilkinson Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, M13 9PL

Robert.parkes@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Appendix 4 – Participant consent form



COVID-19 and the University socio-cultural environment: An exploration of the expectations and experiences of LGBT+ identifying first year undergraduate students.

Consent Form

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below.

Preferred name:

Age:

Course / area of study:

University email address:

	Activities	Initials
1	I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet (Version 1, 02/02/2021) for the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.	
2	I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to myself. I understand that it will not be possible to remove my data from the project once it has been anonymised and forms part of the data set. I agree to take part on this basis.	

3	I agree to the interview being audio recorded with the use of Zoom .	
4	I agree that any data collected may be included in anonymous form in publications (e.g., the research thesis) .	
5	I understand that data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from The University of Manchester or regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	
6	I understand that there may be instances where during the course of the research information is revealed which means the researchers will be obliged to break confidentiality and this has been explained in more detail in the information sheet.	
7	I agree to take part in this study.	
8	I agree that the researchers may retain my contact details in order to conduct a follow up conversation if appropriate to do so.	

Data Protection

The personal information we collect and use to conduct this research will be processed in accordance with UK data protection law as explained in the Participant Information Sheet and the [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#).

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of the person taking consent

Signature

Date

Once signed, you will keep a copy of the consent form and the research team will keep the original. The consent form will be stored securely in line with data protection guidelines.

Appendix 5 – Transcription example

Researcher: What you have just been saying might link to my next question. Thinking about these challenges then, what have you been doing to counteract the challenges that you have had to face?

Participant: I'd say it's like a...it's been a series of different things and different ways to kind of tackle each individual, kind of, problem. There're so many factors that have contributed to what's happening. My own mental health prior to the pandemic, the pandemic starting, University, University life in a pandemic. There's just been a lot of overwhelming things to kind of deal with. I did therapy for quite a few months and that really helped me through that period of...I think I started in October 2020. So that kind of saw me through a very difficult period and yeah...I'd say just kind of working through University stuff really helped because I had something to focus on. I had something to aim for even if I didn't really feel like I was aiming for anything, I still persevered and kept on it. And I ended up with good grades and after that, I kind of thought, well that's kind of the end of that very difficult year. I have done it, so, hopefully the next year will be better and will be the same way. Like, good grades.

Researcher: You mentioned that there are a number of different ways to counteract the challenges. Are there any other ways that you tried to counteract the challenges?

Participant: I definitely had a lot of support from my family. From my mum and dad, who I live with. So, they really supported me in terms of being able to...any kind of worries or concerns that I had, I was able to voice them to them and they really supported me through that. Just on a personal level, finding help, like self-help books and things like that. Like, a lot of online resources and just...things like Instagram slides that have how to self-care, just things like that. Little ways that I can improve my day, on a day to day level. And that was kind of focussed on because obviously when you are in the middle of a pandemic and you're overwhelmed by everything that is going on, you kind of have to take it day by day because otherwise you will be paralysed if you think about it in such a big way. In the way that it actually is. Taking it day by day, yeah. Definitely helped.

Researcher: Just two more questions for you. The first one being: what have you found to be good about the University socio-cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participant: I would say that, obviously, the society that is dedicated to LGBT+ people, that was still running. That was still up and running and the fact that the student union made sure that those kind of societies were still up and running. Even though I didn't get the best, kind of, the best out of it, that was my own doing. But they had those available which I think is brilliant. And just kind of having that availability for people to interact if they choose to. That was really good.

Researcher: Having that ability to interact, what makes that important?

Participant: Just knowing that you're not alone really and having that opportunity to reach out to other people and...yeah, just, especially during the middle of a pandemic when you are in...I mean, people are stuck in their room. Other people were living on campus, locked in these tiny little flats and things. So, just knowing that there's people outside of that space, outside of your own head, which you often feel like you're trapped in, it's nice to have that opportunity to reach out and hear from other people.

Appendix 6 – Example of initial code and theme development

Name	Description	Files	References
THEME: THE UPS AND DOWNS OF DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS DURING A PANDEMIC		0	0
A mismatch of social expectations		4	7
Anxiety that lifelong connections would not be developed.		2	2
Breaking covid-19 restrictions leads to the development of friendships		3	3
Cautious approach when restrictions change		1	1
Clash between covid-19 restrictions and social urges		4	7
Covid-19 interrupts opportunities to develop relationships		9	34
Developing new relationships can be anxiety provoking		2	4
Developing relationships is difficult if cameras are turned off		1	1
Developing relationships with others is vital at Uni		7	21
Difficulties changing behaviour as restriction levels change		1	1
Emotion states dictating social connections		1	1
Excitement at being able to meet others once restrictions lifted		1	1
Hope that the University environment would develop the social self		1	2
Larger social circle means greater social success		1	1

LGBTQ+ allies provide a sense of safety		4	6
Lockdown restrictions encouraged bonding between people		3	3
Making friends with heterosexual peers can be challenging		1	1
Meeting like-minded people is valued		5	9
Meeting new people at Uni is exciting		6	12
Nightlife is important to a student's experience		4	6
Pandemic encouraged a sense of community between staff and students		1	1
Pressure to develop connections		2	2
Relationships with others are important for developing a support network		1	2
Romantic relationships inhibited		2	4
Social environments are helpful for improved well-being		1	1
Social media supported the development of connections in the absence of meeting people physically		1	2
Students are less judgemental		1	2
SU Societies are an important avenue for students to meet new people		6	11
Support from allies is appreciated		1	1
University life can support students to develop relationships with a diverse group of people		1	1
THEME: DIFFICULTIES		0	0

ACCESSING FORMAL SUPPORT AND OTHER APPROACHES TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING			
THEME: STUDENTS TAKING INITIATIVE TO SUPPORT THEIR OWN WELL-BEING IN THE ABSENCE OF OTHER SUPPORT		0	0
Breaking of the rules to support mental health		1	1
Cherishing of the small or basic elements of life		1	1
Developing a structure was important for mental well-being		2	5
Developing a support network is difficult during times of restricted socialising		2	2
Expression of self through the arts is helpful for well-being		1	1
Finding a balance with university work and other aspects of life is important		1	1
Focussing upon University work was helpful through a difficult time		1	1
Moving back home was important for well-being		1	1
Supporting LGBTQ+ peers in the absence of other support		3	3
THEME: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF SUPPORTING SELF AND BEING ABLE TO ACCESS SUPPORT		0	0
Additional academic support required at a time of great stress and change		4	13

Efforts to provide support are undervalued		1	1
Family support helpful for improved well-being		1	1
Inconsistent support from teaching team		1	1
Lack of access to support during online teaching disrupts the learning process		1	2
Lack of personalised support led to a feeling of being unsupported		1	2
Peer support is important to support well-being		1	1
Poor communication by the University of where to access mental health support		1	1
Social circles at University provide pillars of support		1	1
Students did not feel staff always listened to their calls for support		1	1
Support for LGBTQ+ students prior to covid were insufficient		2	2
Support from others can improve well-being		3	6
Support when not 'out' is important for well-being		1	2
Talking to others supports improved well-being		2	3
Teaching staff not supporting the well-being of students		2	3
The University or SU could have done more to provide support or socio-cultural experiences		2	3

Therapy was helpful during a difficult time		2	2
University is not supporting LGBTQ+ people effectively		2	3
University did not provide appropriate interventions to support student well-being		1	2
University did not set the most appropriate tone when supporting students		1	2
University lacks care and compassion for students		2	4
University support services not providing the highest standard of care		3	5
Use of social media to support well-being was important		2	2
THEME: REMOTE WORKING INFLUENCES THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF UNIVERSITY		0	0
Adjusting learning style is a struggle		4	5
Blended learning enhances the learning experience		2	2
Changes in learning method mean changes in meeting people		2	2
Changing to remote working caused difficulties		4	5
Covid-19 changed expectations of learning		1	1
Covid-19 changed experience of learning		6	8
Engagement with lectures dependent upon personality of teaching staff		1	1

Face to face teaching is superior to remote		5	10
Online break-out rooms aided students to develop connections with each other		1	1
Online connections support the development of relationships prior to physically meeting		3	4
Online learning inhibited students from accessing additional support		3	6
Online learning means a less fulfilled student experience		2	7
Online learning was not interactive enough		3	5
Online lectures provide flexibility		4	4
Online lectures support the helpful management of learning		1	1
Online social connections were supportive despite the difficult situation		3	3
Online socialising can lead to worthwhile connections		1	1
Online teaching stifles learning		4	7
Online working can make it more difficult to concentrate		3	5
Online working did not encourage engagement which therefore is detrimental to the learning experience		3	3
Online working did not stimulate excitement to learn		3	4
Online working inhibits the connections students could make to support their learning		6	13

Online working is less value for money		2	2
Online working is more convenient		1	1
Online working may be helpful for students with anxiety		1	1
Online working means a lesser sense of community		5	10
Online working taking away the excitement of University life		1	1
Powerlessness at not being able to change the learning environment		1	2
Relating to teaching staff encourages engagement with course material		1	1
Relationship with teaching team inhibited		1	1
Sudden change can be detrimental to learning		1	1
THEME: THE IMPORTANCE OF LGBTQ+ IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, ACTIVISM AND SAFE SPACES		0	0

Appendix 7 – Refined codes and themes

Thesis data

Final themes and codes

Name	Description	Files	References
1. High expectations of university life		0	0
High expectations of the University social environment		1	1
Hope that the University environment would develop the social self		1	2
Media raised expectations of what university life should be like		1	2
Meeting new people at Uni is exciting		6	12
Students are less judgmental		1	2
Connections with diverse populations is valued		1	1
Free choice an expected part of University life		1	1
Going to University is exciting		8	15
Learning is valued		3	6
LGBTQ+ inclusion within course material limited		1	1
Student societies are a valued part of university life		2	2
University can provide independence		6	12
University is a fresh and open minded experience		2	3
University life provides a space to become		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
involved with social justice issues			
University life provides an accepting and supportive environment		1	1
University provides a form of escapism		2	3
University provides more of an exciting social environment		1	2
2. Perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences		0	0
A mismatch of social expectations		4	7
Anxiety that lifelong connections would not be developed.		2	2
Anxiety that personal development will be affected		2	5
Cautious approach when restrictions change		1	1
Clash between covid-19 restrictions and social urges		4	7
Covid-19 interrupts opportunities to develop relationships		9	34
Developing new relationships can be anxiety provoking		2	4
Developing relationships is difficult if cameras are turned off		1	1
Developing relationships with others is vital at Uni		7	21
Difficulties changing behaviour as restriction levels change		1	1
Emotion states dictating social connections		1	1
Larger social circle means greater social success		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
Accepting that expectations of University life did not come to fruition is challenging		1	1
Anxiety about how covid-19 will affect life		4	4
Covid-19 did not disrupt all that is good about university life		4	4
Covid-19 restrictions meant wasted opportunities		1	1
Cultural exploration is important		2	5
Existing rather than living a life expected		1	1
Feeling of being let down by the Government for not containing the pandemic		1	1
Feeling of being let down by the situation that has unfolded		1	1
Frustration towards peers at the breaking of covid-19 rules		1	4
Hope that change would be short lived		2	2
Living at home can limit the experiences of University life		3	5
Loss of social and cultural experiences due to covid-19		8	29
Sadness at hopes fading away		3	3
University experience became a disappointment		1	1
Nightlife is important to a student's experience		4	6
Pressure to develop connections		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Romantic relationships inhibited		2	4
University life provides a sense of belonging to a shared community		1	1
Adjusting learning style is a struggle		4	5
Blended learning enhances the learning experience		2	2
Changes in learning method mean changes in meeting people		2	2
Changing to remote working caused difficulties		4	5
Covid-19 changed expectations of learning		1	1
Covid-19 changed experience of learning		6	8
Engagement with lectures dependent upon personality of teaching staff		1	1
Face to face teaching is superior to remote		5	10
Online break-out rooms aided students to develop connections with each other		1	1
Online connections support the development of relationships prior to physically meeting		3	4
Online learning inhibited students from accessing additional support		3	6
Online learning means a less fulfilled student experience		2	7
Online learning was not interactive enough		3	5
Online lectures provide flexibility		4	4

Name	Description	Files	References
Online lectures support the helpful management of learning		1	1
Online social connections were supportive despite the difficult situation		3	3
Online socializing can lead to worthwhile connections		1	1
Online teaching stifles learning		4	7
Online working can make it more difficult to concentrate		3	5
Online working did not encourage engagement which therefore is detrimental to the learning experience		3	3
Online working did not stimulate excitement to learn		3	4
Online working inhibits the connections students could make to support their learning		6	13
Online working is less value for money		2	2
Online working is more convenient		1	1
Online working may be helpful for students with anxiety		1	1
Online working means a lesser sense of community		5	10
Online working taking away the excitement of University life		1	1
Powerlessness at not being able to change the learning environment		1	2
Relating to teaching staff encourages		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
engagement with course material			
Relationship with teaching team inhibited		1	1
Sudden change can be detrimental to learning		1	1
3. Pandemic encouraging a sense of community and bonding		0	0
Breaking covid-19 restrictions leads to the development of friendships		3	3
Excitement at being able to meet others once restrictions lifted		1	1
Lockdown restrictions encouraged bonding between people		3	3
Meeting like-minded people is valued		5	9
Pandemic encouraged a sense of community between staff and students		1	1
Relationships with others are important for developing a support network		1	2
Similar experiences can be normalising and reassuring		1	2
Social environments are helpful for improved well-being		1	1
Social media supported the development of connections in the absence of meeting people physically		1	2
University life can support students to develop relationships with a diverse group of people		1	1
4. Disappointment, anger and worsening of wellbeing		0	0

Name	Description	Files	References
A sense of being let down by the University		1	1
Abandoned by the University when diagnosed with Covid-19		1	1
Abandoned by the different institutions within University life		1	1
Appreciation of the difficulties covid-19 presented teaching staff		4	5
Disappointment that SU societies were not more active to provide support		1	1
Disappointment that the University didn't do more to support		1	1
Reduced sense of affiliation with the University institution		1	2
Student voices are not heard		2	4
A lack of direct family support was a strain upon mental health		2	3
Balancing university commitments and personal experiences is draining		1	1
Embracing the limited social experiences were important for well-being		1	2
Expression of LGBTQ+ identity is important for overall well-being		3	5
Inhibited social connections influence well-being for the worse		8	30
Lack of routine and structure stifles work ethic		1	1
Living at home can be an isolating experience		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
Maintaining good mental health during the pandemic was a challenge		1	2
Mixing of working and relaxation space is a challenge		2	4
Motivation levels effected by life restrictions		1	1
Not being 'out' can have a detrimental effect upon well-being		1	1
Pandemic experiences have encouraged the confidence to talk about mental health		1	1
Sudden change can be detrimental to well-being		5	7
University advice not fully embraced		1	1
University life during a pandemic is an isolating experience		10	37
Validating environments are important for improved well-being		1	1
Expectations not fulfilled despite hard work		1	1
Greater support for student led societies may have been helpful		1	1
Pandemic induced a great deal of uncertainty for the future		1	1
Pressures to behave in a certain way		1	1
Restrictions were difficult to comprehend		1	1
Adaptation necessary for survival		6	11
Adaptation of expectations in light of a changing picture		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Adapting personality to the covid-19 situation can be a struggle		1	2
An expectation that adaptations would be made to social contact		1	1
Sacrifices made were invalidated by peers breaking rules		1	2
SU societies adapting to the online environment was a positive experience		1	1
SU societies not able to adapt to the new situation		1	3
University is more overwhelming in an academic sense than expected		1	3
University life can provide hostile situations for LGBTQ+ students		1	2
University over promised and under delivered		1	1
5. Difficulties accessing formal support and other approaches to support wellbeing		0	0
Breaking of the rules to support mental health		1	1
Cherishing of the small or basic elements of life		1	1
Developing a structure was important for mental well-being		2	5
Developing a support network is difficult during times of restricted socialising		2	2
Expression of self through the arts is helpful for well-being		1	1
Finding a balance with university work and		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
other aspects of life is important			
Focusing upon University work was helpful through a difficult time		1	1
Moving back home was important for well-being		1	1
Supporting LGBTQ+ peers in the absence of other support		3	3
Additional academic support required at a time of great stress and change		4	13
Efforts to provide support are undervalued		1	1
Family support helpful for improved well-being		1	1
Inconsistent support from teaching team		1	1
Lack of access to support during online teaching disrupts the learning process		1	2
Lack of personalised support led to a feeling of being unsupported		1	2
Peer support is important to support well-being		1	1
Poor communication by the University of where to access mental health support		1	1
Social circles at University provide pillars of support		1	1
Students did not feel staff always listened to their calls for support		1	1
Support for LGBTQ+ students prior to covid were insufficient		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Support from others can improve well-being		3	6
Talking to others supports improved well-being		2	3
Teaching staff not supporting the well-being of students		2	3
The University or SU could have done more to provide support or socio-cultural experiences		2	3
Therapy was helpful during a difficult time		2	2
University is not supporting LGBTQ+ people effectively		2	3
University did not provide appropriate interventions to support student well-being		1	2
University did not set the most appropriate tone when supporting students		1	2
University lacks care and compassion for students		2	4
University support services not providing the highest standard of care		3	5
Use of social media to support well-being was important		2	2
6. Importance of LGBTQ+ community and spaces		0	0
Authenticity in expressing identity		3	4
Developing acceptance of sexuality inhibited by effects of pandemic		1	1
Developing acceptance of sexuality inhibited by living environment		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Expression of identity can lead to developed connections with others		3	5
Expression of LGBTQ+ identity is important for self-development		8	25
Fear of not being able to express true self		1	2
Freedom of expression promotes healthy well-being		1	1
Going to University encourages a process of personal development		1	2
Identity expression involves risk		3	4
LGBTQ+ identity expression disrupted by covid-19		5	7
Living at home can inhibit expression of identity		1	4
New experiences can provide learning about us		1	1
Pressure to fit in when entering a new environment		1	1
Prospect of being independent from parents and being able to express authentic self-encouraged higher motivation levels		1	1
Realisation that identity can be expressed in different ways		1	1
Social media provides an avenue to explore and develop identity		1	1
University can provide freedom to explore and express identity		5	12

Name	Description	Files	References
University provides a place to develop as a person		7	11
University provides opportunities beyond education		2	4
University provides opportunities for the future		2	3
Unsafe to come out when meeting peers online		1	2
LGBTQ+ allies provide a sense of safety		4	6
Making friends with heterosexual peers can be challenging		1	1
Sports societies can breed an unhelpful environment for LGBTQ+ people		1	1
Student led opportunities were possible		2	2
SU Societies are an important avenue for students to meet new people		6	11
SU Societies are an important avenue for students to meet new people (2)		6	11
Support from allies is appreciated		1	1
Support when not 'out' is important for well-being		1	2
A larger LGBTQ+ community provides opportunities for growth		5	12
Being from the same or similar communities enhances connection		7	19
Being with other LGBTQ+ people provide comfort		9	40
Connection with other LGBTQ+ people is safer		6	18

Name	Description	Files	References
Connection with other LGBTQ+ people is valuable		6	17
LGBTQ+ peer support is important		9	39
LGBTQ+ peers are important to relate to		9	31
An accepting and tolerant environment is welcoming for an LGBTQ+ person		1	2
Embracing LGBTQ+ culture is important		8	16
Emphasis upon queerness equating to LGBTQ+ nightlife		1	2
Important to be mindful of environment as a LGBTQ+ person		1	3
LGBTQ+ activism is important to identity		3	5
LGBTQ+ culture is not defined by nightlife		3	3
LGBTQ+ representation at Uni is important		6	9
LGBTQ+ representation not as explicit or as much as hoped		1	1
LGBTQ+ venues are an important influence upon identity development		10	27
LGBTQ+phobic attitudes are hurtful		3	4
LGBTQ+phobic attitudes can be encountered whilst at University		1	1
Limited access to LGBTQ+ cultural spaces reduced sense of queerness		1	2
Microaggressions are an accepted norm		3	4

Name	Description	Files	References
Social media can provide a safe LGBTQ+ space		1	1

Appendix 8 – Ethics approval letter



Environment, Education and Development School Panel PGR

School for Environment, Education and Development
Humanities Bridgeford Street 1.17

The University of Manchester

Manchester

M13 9PL

Email: PGR.ethics.seed@manchester.ac.uk

Ref: 2021-11342-18206

22/04/2021

Dear Mr Robert Parkes, , Dr Terry Hanley, Dr Laura Winter

Study Title: COVID-19 and the University socio-cultural environment: An exploration of the expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying first year undergraduate students.

Environment, Education and Development School Panel PGR

I write to thank you for submitting the final version of your documents for your project to the Committee on 15/03/2021 14:19. I am pleased to confirm a favourable ethical opinion for the above research on the basis described in the application form and supporting documentation as submitted and approved by the Committee.

COVID-19 Important Note

Please ensure you read the information on the [Research Ethics website](#) in relation to data collection in the COVID environment as well as the [guidance issued by the University](#) in relation to face-to-face (in person) data collection both on and off campus.

[A word document version of this guidance is also available.](#)

Please see below for a table of the titles, version numbers and dates of all the final approved documents for your project:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Additional docs	Interview schedule v2	16/02/2021	v2
Advertisement	Recruitment leaflet	16/02/2021	v1
Additional docs	Distress management protocol v1	16/02/2021	v1
Letters of Permission	Invitation v1	16/02/2021	v1
Participant Information Sheet	Participant information sheet v4	02/03/2021	v4
Advertisement	Twitter account details	02/03/2021	v1
Consent Form	consent form v3	09/03/2021	v3
Data Management Plan	DMP v2	13/03/2021	v2

This approval is effective for a period of five years and is on delegated authority of the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) however please note that it is only valid for the specifications of the research project as outlined in the approved documentation set. If the project continues beyond the 5 year period or if you wish to propose any changes to the methodology or any other specifics within the project an application to seek an amendment must be submitted for review. Failure to do so could invalidate the insurance and constitute research misconduct.

You are reminded that, in accordance with University policy, any data carrying personal identifiers must be encrypted when not held on a secure university computer or kept securely as a hard copy in a location which is accessible only to those involved with the research.

For those undertaking research requiring a DBS Certificate: As you have now completed your ethical application if required a colleague at the University of Manchester will be in touch for you to undertake a DBS check. Please note that you do not have DBS approval until you have received a DBS Certificate completed by the University of Manchester, or you are an MA Teach First student who holds a DBS certificate for your current teaching role.

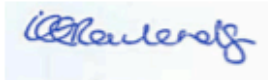
Reporting Requirements:

You are required to report to us the following:

1. [Amendments](#): Guidance on what constitutes an amendment
2. [Amendments](#): How to submit an amendment in the ERM system
3. [Ethics Breaches and adverse events](#)
4. [Data breaches](#)

We wish you every success with the research.

Yours sincerely,



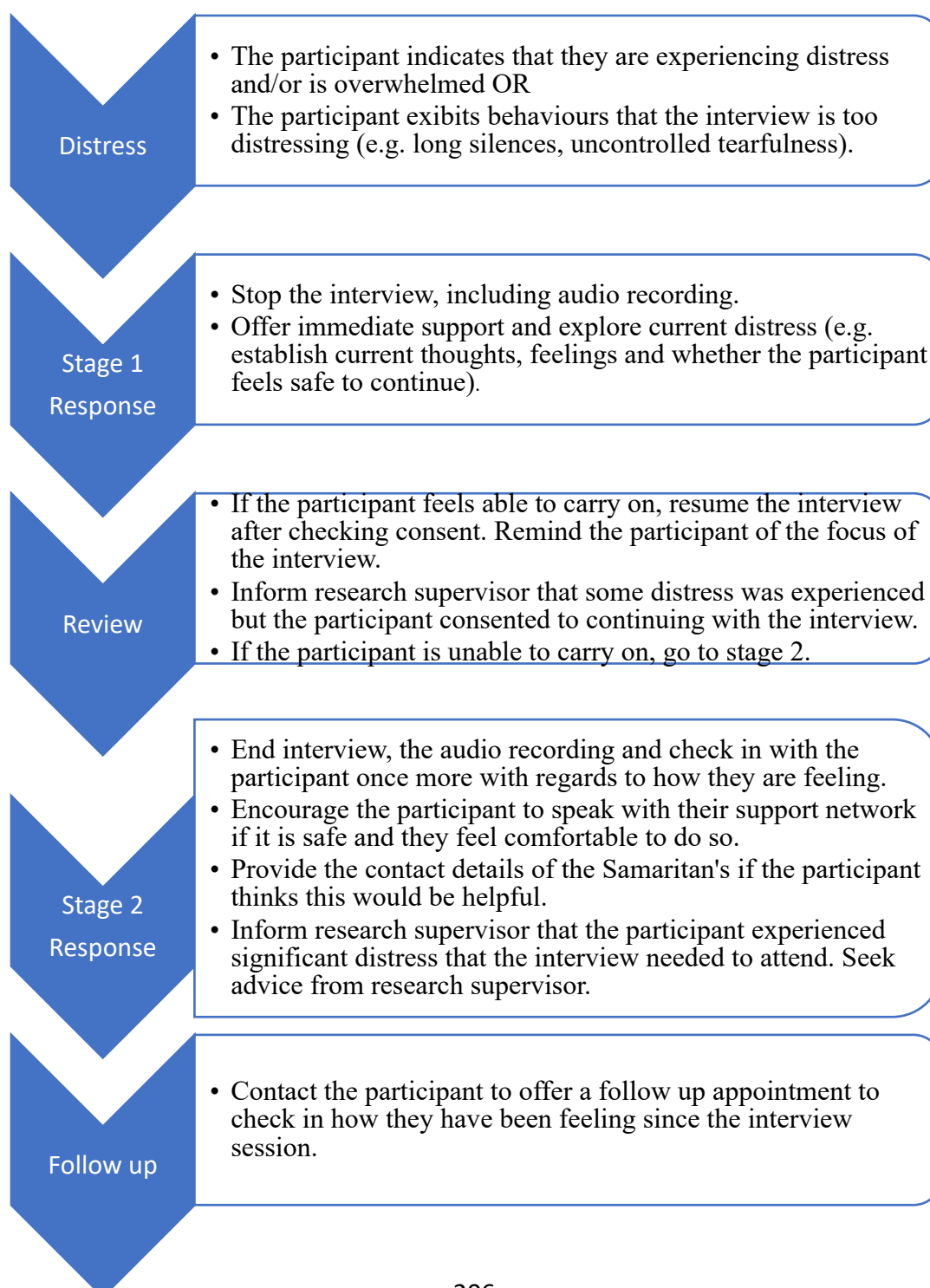
Dr Kate Rowlands

Environment, Education and Development School Panel PGR

Appendix 9 – Distress management protocol

Distress Management Protocol

Adapted from Haigh and Witham (2013)



Appendix 10 – Data management plan

COVID-19 and the University socio-cultural environment: An exploration of the expectations and experiences of LGBT+ identifying first year undergraduate students.

Manchester Data Management Outline

1. Will this project be reviewed by any of the following bodies (please select all that apply)?

Ethics

2. Is The University of Manchester collaborating with other institutions on this project?

No - only institution involved

3. What data will you use in this project (please select all that apply)?

Acquire new data

The data that will be acquired during the project will include audio recordings via Zoom. Signed consent and information sheets given to the participant will be kept.

Once an interview is complete, a transcript of the interview will be created. Pseudonyms will be used and audio files will be encrypted. Reflexive notes will be kept as well as codes and themes being generated from the interview data.

Quotes may also be used.

The final report will contain anonymised information about those who took part in the project.

4. Where will the data be stored and backed-up during the project lifetime?

University of Manchester Research Data Storage Service (Isilon) P Drive (postgraduate researchers and students only)

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1 of 11

Signed consent forms will be sent to the lead researchers encrypted University email account and downloaded to a file on a password protected laptop before said file is encrypted. Signed consent forms will then be immediately uploaded to the University P Drive and any other copies of the document will be deleted (including from the computer recycle bin).

Please note - The lead researcher is the only person able to access the laptop being used. When it is not being used, the laptop will be safely stored and not accessible to others. The laptop is password protected.

Recordings from the interviews will be downloaded from Zoom and saved in an encrypted folder. Recordings will be backed up by uploading the encrypted file to the University P Drive. The recordings will be deleted from the lead researchers computer (and the recycle bin) as soon as the recordings have been transcribed. Until this time, the files will remain in an encrypted folder.

The encrypted and pseudonymised transcripts will be deleted from the lead researchers laptop (including recycle bin) within 72 hours of the time of analysis. The transcripts will be back up on the P Drive and encrypted.

A document that links participants with their pseudonym reference will be back up on the P Drive and deleted from the lead researchers computer within 24 hours of the interview taking place.

All other data (including codes; themes; quotes; reflexive notes; participant checks) will be kept pseudonymised and stored within encrypted programmes, e.g., Microsoft word), on the lead researchers laptop. All drafts will be back up on the RDS and deleted from the lead researchers laptop. This will allow a supervisor, Dr Laura Winter, to access the analysis and provide feedback without the use of email. The supervisor will also not be able to access any other information.

5. If you will be using Research Data Storage, how much storage will you require?

1 - 8 TB

6. Are you going to be working with a 3rd party data provider?

No

7. How long do you intend to keep your data for after the end of your project (in years)?

5 - 10 years

Questions about personal information

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2 of 11

Personal information, also known as personal data, relates to identifiable living individuals. Special category personal data is more sensitive information such as medical records, ethnic background, religious beliefs, political opinions, sexual orientation and criminal convictions or offences information. If you are not using personal data then you can skip the rest of this section.

Please note that in line with [data protection law](#) (the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018), personal information should only be stored in an identifiable form for as long as is necessary for the project; it should be pseudonymised (partially de-identified) and/or anonymised (completely de-identified) as soon as practically possible. You must obtain the appropriate [ethical approval](#) in order to use identifiable personal data.

8. What type of personal information will you be processing (please select all that apply)?

Audio and/or video recordings

Pseudonymised personal data

Anonymised personal data

Personal information, including signed consent forms Special categories and criminal convictions

I will be collecting, creating and processing:

- 1) Signed consent forms.
- 2) Audio recordings of responses and additions to interview questions. As the study is aimed at exploring the experiences of the LGBT+ identifying students, recruitment will be targeted at these groups (e.g., LGBT+ student union society). At the end of the interview, participants will be asked to outline how they would describe themselves. They may wish to describe what their sexuality is at this point, however, will not be directly asked.
- 3) Transcripts - All of these will be anonymised.

Participants may mention names of institutions, the city they reside in, the city of their university or other personal information during the interview. Participants will be advised at the beginning of the interview to try their best to avoid sharing any personal identifiable information. However, if this happens, all information that could identify the participant (e.g., University name) will be anonymised.

Interviews will be recorded using the Zoom audio capturing service. Interviews will be guided by a semi-structured interview schedule that would have been approved during the ethics application process. Semi-structured interviews allow for some deviation from the main question; however all efforts will be made to make sure an interview stays within the remit that has been approved.

9. How do you plan to store, protect and ensure confidentiality of the participants' information (please select all that apply)?

Store data on servers or computers that are approved by The University of Manchester and securely backed up
Encrypt files, folders, computers and devices where personal data is held Pseudonymise data and apply secure key management procedures Anonymise data.

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3 of 11

Where needed, follow The University of Manchester guidelines for disposing of personal data

Consent forms will be exchanged through encrypted University emails. Consent forms will be downloaded to the lead researchers computer. The files will be encrypted and then uploaded to the P Drive before being deleted from the lead researchers computer (and recycle bin). The supervisor will not have access to the consent forms and emails containing the consent form / participant information will be deleted. The participant will be asked to do the same.

No paper copies of consent forms will be produced and participants will be asked to sign the consent form electronically. If the client requests a paper copy of the consent form before they sign, they will be asked to keep this form in a secure place. Once received, consent forms will be scanned, encrypted and uploaded to the P Drive.

Each participant will choose the pseudonym that they wish to use. The pseudonym / participant key will be kept separate to other documents, encrypted and uploaded to the P Drive.

Before recordings of interviews start, participants will be asked to not mention any personal identifiable information. If for any reason they do this, all personal identifiable information will be anonymised. Audio recordings will only be able to be accessed by the lead researcher in part due to this.

A supervisor (Dr Laura Winter) will have access to the transcripts, codes, themes and notes created. All information will be anonymised / pseudonymised to prevent identification of participants. The information available to the supervisor will be available via the RDS.

Any information held on the researchers laptop will be brief and backed up on the University systems (P Drive and RDS). The researchers laptop will be password protected and kept in a secure room. No other devices will be used.

The University's policy on the use of Zoom and managing of recordings will be followed.

10. If you are storing personal information (including contact details) will you need to keep it beyond the end of the project?

No

11. Will the participants' information (personal and/or sensitive) be shared with or accessed by anyone outside of the University of Manchester?

No

12. If you will be sharing personal information outside of the University of Manchester will the individual or organisation you are sharing with be outside the EEA?

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4 of 11

Not applicable

13. Are you planning to use the personal information for future purposes such as research?

No

14. Who will act as the data custodian for this study, and so be responsible for the information involved?

Dr Laura Winter

15. Please provide the date on which this plan was last reviewed (dd/mm/yyyy).

2021-02-15

Project details

What is the purpose of your research project?

The purpose of the project is to explore the experiences of LGBT+ identifying first year undergraduate students during the covid-19 pandemic. The project is particularly interested in the socio-cultural experiences of the undergraduate students. This meaning their experiences of social life, interactions and cultural experiences when attending university during the covid-19 pandemic.

What policies and guidelines on data management, data sharing, and data security are relevant to your research project?

I will follow the University data protection policies. These include: the research data management policy; records management policy; data protection policy' and intellectual property policy.

The University of Manchester IT policies and guidelines will be followed. They can be found here:
<http://www.itservices.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/policy/>

The University of Manchester Publications Policy will also be followed:

<http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=28526>

I will also follow the regulations as set out by the GDPR. This is in addition to the BPS code of human research ethics and the HCPC standards of conduct, performance and ethics guidelines.

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5 of 11

Responsibilities and Resources who will be responsible for data management?

Data capture, analysis and report writing: Robert Parkes (lead researcher).

Data quality inspection: Robert Parkes, Dr Laura Winter (1st supervisor and data custodian) and Dr Terry Hanley (2nd supervisor).

Storage and back-up: Robert Parkes, Dr Laura Winter and University of Manchester IT Services.

Data archiving and sharing: Robert Parkes, Dr Laura Winter and University of Manchester IT Services.

What resources will you require to deliver your plan?

University / outlook email access. Microsoft Office
Zoom account
P Drive

RDS access (yet to be provided).

Data Collection

What data will you collect or create?

As the lead researcher, I will collect signed consent forms (Word document / .doc) and facilitate semi-structured interviews with participants which will be audio recorded via zoom. Interviews will be guided by a schedule that has been approved by the University ethics committee. Participants will also be asked to describe how they identify at the end of the interview (e.g., if they identify with a particular gender, sexual orientation or religion).

Audio recordings will be conducted via Zoom and will be stored as a M4A file.

Following the interview, a transcript of this interview will be created within a Word Document / .doc file.

After each interview, reflexive research notes (within a Word document / .doc) will be kept, anonymised and stored within an encrypted file. An anonymised and securely stored reflexive journal will also be kept.

Through data analysis, codes and themes will be produced. These will all be anonymised.

Any pseudonyms used will be those created by the participant and a participant / pseudonym key document will be kept secure.

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6 of 11

With regards to total storage requirements, 20 participants will be sought. Interviews are expected to last no longer than one hour.

How will the data be collected or created?

Consent forms will be signed by myself and sent to the participant, via encrypted email, to the participant. They will return the consent form via the encrypted email server and the procedures outlined elsewhere in this document will be followed. Files containing consent forms will be named using numbers (e.g., cf_1) and stored in an encrypted folder called "cf".

Audio of the interview will be collected / created via Zoom provided by the University. Files will be encrypted before uploading to the P Drive and labelled with the use of numbers (e.g., "re_1"). A unique Zoom link will be used for each interview that takes place as well as passcodes being mandatory.

All emails connecting to a participant will be deleted following the interview taking place. The participant will be asked to do the same.

Before any recordings take place, participants will be asked if they are still able to take part and that they are safe to do so. Participants will be encouraged to use headphones in order to allow the interview to be confidential. Interviews will be guided by an interview schedule which would have been approved by the ethics committee.

Transcripts of recordings will be created by the lead research (Robert Parkes) within 72 hours of the interview taking place. Transcripts will be created using a Microsoft Word document and will be encrypted. Documents will be titled with a number that relates to the pseudonym key (e.g., "t_1.docx"). "v2" will be added to the document name if any developments to the document need to be made. Early drafts of the transcript will be subsequently deleted.

Codes and themes will be created by copying each transcript into a new encrypted word document (e.g., "an_1.docx") and reside in an encrypted folder labelled "an". These documents will be backed up on the RDS and deleted from the researchers computer.

Research supervisors will have access to the anonymised analysis in order to appropriately review the data and provide guidance during the research project.

The NVivo application will be used to aid analyse the data / information. All documents will be encrypted and backed up on the RDS. No documents will be stored on the researchers computer.

The participant / pseudonym key will be kept in an encrypted document, within a folder, both labelled "pkey". This will be stored on the P Drive.

Documentation and Metadata

What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?

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7 of 11

Type of documentation

Format(s)**File name****Who has access**

Post interview reflexive notes	Anonymised, encrypted word document	in_1_docx	Robert Parkes Dr Laura Winter
Codes / themes	Encrypted word document (anonymised)	an_1_docx	Robert Parkes Dr Laura Winter Dr Terry Hanley Thesis assessors
Analysis	Encrypted NVivo doc	finalal.nvpx	Robert Parkes Dr Laura Winter Dr Terry Hanley Thesis assessors
Encryption key	Anonymised data within word documents	ekey.docs	Robert Parkes Dr Laura Winter

Pseudonym key Reflexive Journal Final thesis report

Research questions:

Names and pseudonyms of participants

Anonymised and encrypted word document

Anonymised information with pseudonyms

pkey.docx rj.data.docx thesis.date.docx

Robert Parkes

Robert Parkes

Open access

What expectations did LGBTQ+ first year undergraduates have of the University's socio- cultural environment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

How have LGBTQ+ first year undergraduates experienced the University socio-cultural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As previously described, semi-structured interviews will be conducted in order to explore experiences related to the above questions. 20 participants will be sought in order to account for dropouts. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcripts will be created by Robert Parkes following this. An interview schedule will be followed during the interviews.

Data will be analysed with the use of reflexive thematic analysis.

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8 of 11

Ethics and Legal Compliance How will you manage any ethical issues?

The project is considered medium risk and therefore we will follow the correct procedures to gain ethical approval as set out by the University ethics committee.

Informed consent will be sought after without compromise. Participants will have access to an information sheet outlining the study and the limits of confidentiality. Participants can opt out of answering any question and can withdraw from the study at any point. Consent procedures will be clearly explained with the consent and information sheets that will be provided. Participants will keep a copy of the consent form that they sign.

Participants can pull out of the study at any point before the data collected is anonymised. Information will be anonymised and pseudonymising will take place. Participants will be asked which pseudonym they would like to use. There will be a document that only I can access which will inform me of which participants link to which pseudonym. The information will be kept within an encrypted file.

Participants will be advised within the participant information sheet of how to raise concerns / ethical concerns.

Information will be held on either the RDS or P Drive. Data detailing participant person information and interview / analysis documents will be held on separate platforms. All files will be encrypted.

Ethical issues will be addressed by the lead researcher with the support of the 1st supervisor. Participants will have access to contact Dr Laura Winter (1st supervisor) if any complaint is to be made.

Regular supervisor meetings will aid the lead researcher to manage the issues the project may surface.

How will you manage copyright and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues?

The copyright and IPR of generated data will be owned by the lead researcher, Robert Parkes.

Storage and backup

How will the data be stored and backed up?

All files will be encrypted and stored on secure servers provided by the University. P Drive:

Consent forms

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9 of 11

Audio recordings transcripts Pseudonym key

RDS:

Any copies of documents / files that are on the lead researchers computer will be deleted as soon as possible (including from the recycle bin). Zoom recordings and email downloads will be on the researchers computer briefly before being uploaded to the secure storage servers.

The RDS and P Drive are automatically backed up on a daily basis and will be used to store the master copies of the data.

How will you manage access and security?

Data will be retained and managed by following the relevant University policies, GDPR and guidelines set out by the HCPC / BPS. There will be use of only University approved storage methods.

In order to access information, 3 individual passwords will be provided (i.e., the computer password; folder password; and file password). Data will be accessed using a secure connection, e.g., the University's Virtual Private Network.

The laptop will remain in a locked cabinet when not in use.

A supervisor will have access to limited data and all of which will be anonymised. All email exchanges with participants will be deleted as previously described. Zoom links and passwords will be unique to each participant.

Audios will be downloaded to the researchers computer briefly before being uploaded to the University's storage platforms. Audios will then be deleted from the researchers computer (including the computer bin).

Selection and Preservation

Which data should be retained, shared, and/or preserved?

Research data, including consent forms, should be retained for at least 5 years following publication. Dr Laura Winter will be the guardian of the data during this time.

Once no longer required for analysis, audio recordings and the pseudonym key will be securely disposed of.

Codes; themes; quotes Reflexive writings Encryption key

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10 of 11

What is the long-term preservation plan for the dataset?

At the end of the project, data will be transferred securely to the data custodian (Dr Laura Winter).

All data will be uploaded to the RDS.

Data Sharing

How will you share the data?

Data will be shared with the research supervisor via the RDS. Data will be anonymised and pseudonyms used.

The anonymised final thesis report will be shared with assessors, registered UoM students via the library and other readers.

If the final project / data is to be published, the below service will be used to find an appropriate data repository.

www.re3data.org

Are any restrictions on data sharing required?

Participants will be asked if they consent for the findings of the research to be shared with supervisors, assessors and to be published. The information sheet and consent form will enable a participant to make an informed decision.

Data will be anonymised and pseudonyms provided. No personal identifiable information will be shared.

The guidelines and policies described elsewhere in this plan will also be followed.

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11 of 11

Appendix 11 – Supporting quotes from analysis process

Theme: High expectations of university life

Excitement to interact with diverse groups of people:

“I just expected, like I said before, things at Uni to feel more liberal but I guess one of the big expectations I would have was that I kind of be able to find a group that I resonate with. Yeah, I have my friends back home but at Uni I kind of needed...I had this idea that I would find this group of people that I got along really well with and they...they would just understand me”.

(Michael)

“More, sort of, diverse people. More people from the community. I just think being in a big city, you can meet people with the same interests and then you can meet people with the same...like part of the LGBT community. People who take your course and then a part of all these things...there’s a lot more diversity to other people so you can find more people you can get along with more”.

(Nancy)

Theme: Perceived loss of learning, social and cultural experiences

Remote learning being inferior:

“It didn’t feel very interactive, even though they claimed that the learning would be interactive and we would be able to message them if we had any issues. But it just didn’t feel like that. Yeah, it just wasn’t very good”.

(Michael)

"I did not get very much out of remote learning...it felt really, really isolating at times. Because even though like I communicated with people online, that wasn't really enough because I wasn't meeting people in real life".

(James)

Theme: Disappointment, anger and worsening of wellbeing

"Well, I find it really hard to...when I am going through a rough time with my mental health, which I already was because of being, kind of, locked away during the pandemic, I find it really hard to find the motivation to do things that I need to do. And I was really unmotivated but then I was also anxious that I wasn't going to pass my first year".

(Ashford)

Theme: Difficulties accessing formal support and other approaches to support wellbeing

Disappointment / anger at a lack of support:

"I think they often just felt like they didn't really care. Or that it was a half-hearted effort. Like, if someone reached out for support, they would mindlessly send them links to external organisations. I do understand to some extent because there are things that the Uni can't help with and it's nice to point people on. But it would be nice for them to show some care when doing this".

(Sapphire)

Michael had similar feelings about the perceived lack of support provided.

“The amount of times I reached out to the uni and they didn’t do anything, it made me feel quite helpless”.

“I do feel a bit cheated by the uni just because there was not much support in terms of, like, the academic stuff. They kind of just gave us the work and were like...here you go, here is the work, just do it. Wherever you would ask for help, they would kind of fob you off and not really do anything. So, that was quite annoying. Yeah. It’s mainly just like the Uni themselves. The lack of support they gave us in terms of doing work”.

(Michael)

Theme: Importance of LGBTQ+ community and spaces

Importance of LGBTQ+ spaces:

“There is kind of an area in the town that...the university town, there is an area that is dedicated to the LGBT community. So, I found that really important to me and wanted to explore that with new people and explore it more than I have done previously. So that was really important to me”.

(Mary)

*“I used to go to a monthly LGBT night that was run in *****. I used to go to that. So yeah...that stopped. I mean that’s not been going since the actual start of the pandemic which was March 2020. So that’s not been on at all. I used to really enjoy going there because all my friends were going. It was fun. It was a night out where I could let my hair down and enjoy myself. There isn’t a lot that goes on in my town for*

LGBT anyway. So, that was a really good thing that stopped. So yeah, that's made me feel more isolated".

(Anne)

Difficulties with connecting:

"The majority of my friends are straight so they don't really fully understand the issues and my feelings towards certain LGBT topics. So, not being able to meet people as much, not being able to make those connections with other people like me, it did feel like I missed out on a good opportunity to make good friends because then I would have that support network where someone could actually understand how I feel about these issues. Yeah. I just didn't really get that in first year".

(Michael)