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Non-Normative Childhood in Heteronormative Order

Gizem Çelebi¹  | Sevcen Yağan² ¹Child Development and Education, İstanbul Okan University, İstanbul, Turkey | ²Early Childhood Education, İstanbul Kültür University, İstanbul, Turkey**Correspondence:** Gizem Çelebi (gizemmcelebi@gmail.com)**Received:** 28 August 2024 | **Revised:** 25 April 2025 | **Accepted:** 28 April 2025**Keywords:** adolescence | childhood | gender | heteronormativity | interviews | LGBT+ | qualitative

ABSTRACT

This study examines the childhood experiences of LGBT+ adults who were born and raised in Turkey and spent their childhood and adolescence in Turkey within the framework of family, friendship, education, life, and social spheres. The research group consists of 11 participants aged between 18 and 30, 10 of whom are still living in Turkey and 1 of whom moved abroad in adulthood. The participants were selected by snowball sampling method. The research was conducted based on a phenomenological design, which is a qualitative research method. One-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. The findings reveal that the participants were exposed to gender norms in their family, friends, educational, and social environments and that this significantly affected their self-discovery processes from an early age. It was determined that the ‘coming out’ processes and social acceptance of the participants spread over a long period of time. The research highlights the urgent need for structural reforms to protect the rights of LGBT+ children and increase social acceptance.

1 | Introduction

The term ‘sex’ is used to differentiate individuals at birth based on biological characteristics, distinguishing between males and females. This definition highlights chromosomal, anatomical, hormonal, reproductive, and other physiological differences. In contrast, gender pertains to the social, cultural, and psychological attributes linked to socially constructed concepts of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. While sex is an inherent biological condition, gender is a socially constructed status (Lindsey 2015). The concept of gender is shaped by cultural influences and dictates the attitudes and behaviours expected of individuals based on their sex. The development of gender roles is contingent upon the social expectations associated with the assigned gender. Individuals who deviate from these roles may face challenges in achieving societal acceptance (Meyer 2003; Sarıbay 2001).

The development of gender identity and associated social roles commences early in a child's life, with evidence indicating that children can identify their gender by age two (Chick et al. 2002; Martin and Ruble 2009). Although gender identity begins to take shape within the first 2–3 years, parental attitudes and societal judgements exert a considerable influence on the formation of gender roles. Parents, whether consciously or unconsciously, transmit to their children the attributes and behaviours associated with their assigned gender. The influence of culture reinforces social roles through the use of colour, toys, clothing and behaviour (Brill and Pepper 2011). Millett (1973) argues that familial, pedagogical, and cultural influences are crucial in shaping sexual identity during childhood, contending that a child's entire life is devoted to learning to conform to gender-specific expectations, with characteristics of femininity and masculinity being predominantly learned and acquired (Millett 1973, 59).

This study is derived from the master's thesis of the first author under the supervision of the second author.

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Summary

- Explores the childhood experiences of LGBT+ individuals in Turkey within the context of a heteronormative society.
- Employs a phenomenological research design through in-depth interviews to examine how gender norms shape processes of self-discovery.
- Emphasizes the urgent need for structural reforms to ensure the protection of LGBT+ children and foster greater societal acceptance.

The development of gender and sexuality in LGBT+ children parallels that of heterosexual and cisgender children; however, they often face distinct challenges stemming from discriminatory and heteronormative attitudes prevalent in their familial, social, and educational environments (Kabacaoğlu 2015; Şimşek 2022). A significant number of states exclude children from the legal and de facto definitions of gender identity, leading to the misconception that sexual orientation and gender identity are solely adult concerns. Nevertheless, recognising that each child's process of developing sexual orientation and gender identity is distinct and individualised is essential (Kaos GL 2020a, 38).

The heteronormative social structure may have a profoundly traumatic impact on LGBT+ individuals, leading to early experiences of stigmatisation, discrimination, and violence due to their non-conformity to traditional gender roles. An analysis of the 2020 Homophobia and Transphobia-Based Hate Crimes Report by Kaos GL reveals that, of the 150 cases reported in 2019, 37 involved children and young people aged 13 to 17, with the majority of these victims targeted at their schools (21 cases) and homes (5 cases). The family, as a social institution, underpins legitimate sexual unions, childcare, upbringing, and the formation of gender identities through the enactment of female and male roles (Bozok 2018). In a 2015 study conducted in the USA, only one in three young people whose sexual identity and orientation were not accepted by their families believed they would have a good life, whereas those with supportive families developed a more positive self-concept (Ryan et al. 2015). In a study conducted by GLSEN in the USA in 2011, it was reported that eight out of ten LGBT+ students experienced peer bullying due to their sexual orientation, leading to feelings of insecurity within educational settings, increased absenteeism, and a decline in academic achievement (Kosciw et al. 2012). The survey conducted by Lambdaistanbul in 2006 revealed that 51.52% of participants who were open about their sexual orientation to school friends experienced verbal harassment, 40.91% were ignored, and 24% were isolated by some of their peers (Lambdaistanbul 2006). On the other hand, LGBT+ individuals who are accepted by their families and social circles tend to achieve academic success, attain higher socioeconomic status, and enhance their chances of broader acceptance through the formation of new social networks (Erdoğan and Köten 2015).

This study addresses the issue that, in heterosexist societies, the union of men and women is considered the sole legitimate form of partnership due to societal attitudes and behaviours that are rooted in gender roles and a reproduction-oriented understanding. These attitudes and behaviours significantly impact LGBT+

individuals from an early age, often resulting in traumatic experiences. This study aims to examine the coming out processes for LGBT+ adults, influencing factors, impact of family, peer relations, education, and gender stereotypes on childhood experiences. It is anticipated that the research will enhance the visibility of LGBT+ children and their challenges related to their early experiences.

2 | Method

2.1 | Research Design

This research adhered to the principles of the phenomenological approach, a qualitative research design that utilises an interpretive methodology to address research problems from a holistic perspective (Altunışık et al. 2010). Phenomenology is a research method that prioritises an understanding of the essence of a phenomenon or experience. The objective of the phenomenological approach is to explore in detail how individuals perceive a phenomenon, the meanings they attribute to it, and the content of their experiences. This approach relies on the direct expression of experiences by individuals, allowing researchers to gain in-depth insight into participants' perspectives, feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Saldana 2011). The objective of the phenomenological approach is to elucidate the stereotypes imposed by society on LGBT+ identities within the contexts of family, school experiences, and friendships. This is accomplished by analysing the participants' opinions, impressions, and experiences.

Understanding the societal, historical, and cultural contexts that shape these experiences is crucial in applying the phenomenological approach, particularly when examining issues related to marginalised groups. Since the second half of the twentieth century, feminist and LGBT+ movements have contributed to understanding gender as a social construct and achieving significant legal advancements (Hines 2021). In Turkey, this process has been supported by the establishment of organisations such as Lambda İstanbul, Kaos GL, and Siyah-Pembe Üçgen (Ataman 2009; Kurbanoğlu 2011). However, LGBT+ individuals have faced systemic discrimination, violence, and social exclusion, particularly since the 1970s. The 1980s, despite progress such as the legalisation of gender transition processes for trans individuals, are described as a period of heightened oppression against LGBT+ individuals. During this time, the media frequently targeted LGBT+ individuals with stigmatising rhetoric (Gürsü 2013).

The 2000s represent a turning point, marked by the institutionalisation of the LGBT+ movement and the spread of organised activism. The first Pride Week in İstanbul (2003) and the Homophobia-Free Meetings organised by Kaos GL (2020b) created platforms for solidarity and awareness among LGBT+ organisations. However, since 2015, the banning of Pride Marches and restrictions on LGBT+ events have intensified obstacles faced by the movement. For example, the cancellation of the 'Benim Çocuğum'¹ documentary screening at a state university and the detention of over 500 individuals during the 2022 Pride Marches highlight the systemic oppression of LGBT+ individuals (Şenel 2014). This sociocultural context provides a critical backdrop for understanding the experiences of the participants

TABLE 1 | Demographic information of the participants.

Nickname	Age	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Place of childhood	Education status	Profession
Uzay	24	Woman	Bisexual	Istanbul	Undergraduate (ongoing)	Student
Buket	21	Trans woman	Heterosexual	Ankara	Secondary school	Unemployed
Ada	30	Man/gender nonconforming	Pansexual	Istanbul	Bachelor's	Project manager
Ali	18	Non-binary	Gay	Istanbul	Undergraduate (ongoing)	Student
Pelin	27	Woman	Pansexual	Village	Graduate	Teacher
Mert	25	Man	Gay	Istanbul	Undergraduate (ongoing)	Sales consultant
Yağmur	22	Woman/Demigirl	Pansexual	Istanbul	Undergraduate (ongoing)	Student
Flower	25	Man	Gay	Up to 7 years old: van, then Adana	Graduate	Student
Kedi	27	Non-binary	Asexual, pansexual	Alternating between village and city	Graduate	Psychological counsellor, content creator
Güneş	27	Woman	Lesbian	Small town	Bachelor's	Teacher
Çağlar	26	Binary	Gay	Van	Bachelor's	Translator

and assigning meaning to their individual narratives. The phenomenological approach aims to capture the essence of these lived experiences while considering the broader context in which they are situated.

2.2 | Study Group

As posited by Rubin and Babbie (2000), the snowball sampling method is appropriate when access to the members of the target group is difficult to obtain. Accordingly, the research study group was accessed utilising the snowball sampling method. In this process, the researcher disseminated information about the study and issued announcements to maximise reach. Moreover, the study group was constituted by identifying and engaging LGBT+ acquaintances of the participants via social media platforms, notably Twitter and Instagram. It was ensured that participants in the study were LGBT+ individuals who had spent their childhood in Turkey and were between the ages of 18 and 30. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, resulting in a total of 11 individuals being included in the study.

To ensure participant confidentiality, the names used in the research were pseudonyms chosen by the participants rather than their real names (see Table 1).

The age range of the participants was between 18 and 30 years old, with an average age of 24.7 years. Upon analysis of the gender identity of the participants, it was determined that four

women, one trans woman, three men, two non-binary individuals, and one binary individual were interviewed. One female participant self-identifies as a 'demi-girl', while one male participant identifies as gender nonconforming. Regarding sexual orientation, the participants are categorised as follows: one heterosexual, five homosexual (including one lesbian and four gay), four pansexual (with one also identifying as asexual), and one bisexual. Additionally, four participants are students, two are teachers, and the remaining participants are engaged in various professional roles. Among the participants, one has completed secondary education, four are pursuing undergraduate studies, three have graduated from undergraduate programmes, two are enrolled in master's degree programs, and one has completed a master's degree.

2.3 | Data Collection, Ethical Procedure and Trustworthiness

In this study, data were collected using a semi-structured interview technique. The data collection involved the Informed Consent Form, the Personal Information Form, and the Interview Form. Following a thorough review of the relevant literature, a draft of the Interview Form was developed. The Interview Form was initially distributed to two lecturers specialising in research on gender and gender identities. One of the lecturers is an associate professor specialising in psychological counselling and guidance, with significant research experience in gender and gender identities. The other lecturer holds a PhD in early childhood education and a master's degree in women's

studies, with expertise in gender and gender identities. Based on the feedback provided by the lecturers and the research supervisor, revisions were made to the Interview Form to enhance its effectiveness and relevance.

Subsequently, a pilot interview was conducted with an individual who shared similar characteristics with the participant group—specifically, an LGBT+ individual who spent their childhood in Turkey. This individual was not included in the main participant group of the study. The pilot interview aimed to assess the clarity of the questions, their potential to cause distress, and their effectiveness in eliciting the desired data. Feedback from the pilot participant informed the finalisation of the interview form. The interview form consisted of 15 questions designed to explore various aspects of participants' experiences. Questions addressed topics such as their coming out experiences, the relationship between their choices of play, toys, and friends, family life, educational experiences, and friendships. As the final question, participants were asked to describe their overall experience using a metaphor. This allowed them to summarise their journey in a way that resonated most with them. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix 1.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of İstanbul Okan University (Ethics Committee Approval No: 19, Meeting No: 154), on 27.04.2022. All procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human research and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose and content of the study, and their verbal and written consents were obtained separately for participation and for audio and video recording, all on a voluntary basis. During the consent phase, participants were made aware of their rights, including 'freedom of withdrawal', 'confidentiality', 'anonymity', and 'privacy'.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, facilitated by announcements on social media and supported by participants in sharing the study with other LGBT+ individuals. The study group was limited to individuals who had experienced their childhood in Turkey and were aged between 18 and 30. Beyond these criteria, there were no restrictions regarding class or city, allowing data collection to include LGBT+ individuals not only from İstanbul but also from various other cities. This approach also enabled the inclusion of one participant from abroad, whose experiences in both Turkey and a foreign country provided valuable contributions to the data. The diversity within the study group in terms of country, city, age, gender identity, and sexual orientation enriched the research, as each participant evaluated their experiences from childhood to the present through unique perspectives.

While face-to-face interviews were initially planned, online interviews were incorporated via the TeamLink platform to accommodate participants' confidentiality requests or their places of residence. The average duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min, and all interviews were conducted by the researcher. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with three participants (Yağmur, Uzay, and Eylül), while the

remaining eight participants were interviewed online through TeamLink.

To establish the trustworthiness and rigour of the qualitative data, this study employed multiple strategies throughout the research process. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with participants to enhance the credibility of the data. These interviews aimed to understand participants' perspectives and uncover the factors influencing their views. During this process, the researcher maintained a neutral stance by setting aside personal biases and preconceptions to ensure an objective data collection and analysis process. This approach aligns with Trainor and Graue's (2014) emphasis on reflexivity, which is vital for maintaining objectivity while acknowledging the researcher's role in the inquiry.

The researcher and the supervisor independently coded the data, ensuring a collaborative and rigorous approach to thematic analysis. Any discrepancies in the coding process were addressed through detailed discussions, reinforcing the reliability of the findings. This practice adheres to methodological transparency principles outlined by Trainor and Graue (2014), which highlight the importance of documenting the research process to enhance the credibility and reliability of qualitative studies.

Additionally, rich descriptions were utilised to illustrate the findings. Direct quotations from participants were included to ensure authenticity and accurately represent their voices. This approach aligns with Trainor and Graue's (2014) notion of narrative transparency, which emphasises the importance of providing vivid and contextualised accounts to foster a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. The interviews with the participants were conducted in Turkish. The data obtained from the interviews were directly translated into English by the researcher during the process of writing this article. During the translation, particular attention was paid to preserving the original meaning and context of the participants' statements. However, formal translation methods such as backward and forward translation were not employed. To ensure accuracy and consistency, the researcher relied on expertise in the relevant terminology and context. Also the paper proofread by an expert who holds a double major bachelor's degree in both Preschool Education and English Language Teaching and has a master's degree in English language teaching. Therefore, she is an expert with a strong command of terminology related to childhood and gender studies.

In the transcription phase, audio recordings obtained during the interviews were initially saved on a recording device and subsequently uploaded to a computer. Each recording was meticulously reviewed and transcribed into text. To ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions, the audio recordings and corresponding texts were rechecked. Additionally, a lecturer from the Department of Child Development was consulted to validate the accuracy. This approach enhanced both the precision and reliability of the transcription process.

Finally, the research design, data collection, and analysis processes were meticulously documented. This careful documentation aligns with the principles of rigour outlined in

qualitative methodology literature, ensuring the study provides a comprehensive and reliable exploration of participants' experiences. By integrating these strategies, the research adhered to the highest standards of qualitative inquiry while providing meaningful insights into the experiences of LGBT+ individuals.

2.4 | Data Analysis

The core of the analysis process was based on data obtained from in-depth interviews conducted with 11 LGBT+ participants via descriptive analysis. Audio recordings, taken with the participants' consent, were transcribed individually for each participant. During the transcription phase, each recording was meticulously converted into text. Following the transcription, an open coding process was applied to generate initial codes. These codes were then consolidated into broader themes.

The data were analysed through a four-stage process. The initial stage involved the systematic coding of the data. In the initial stage, the researchers undertook a thorough examination of the collected data, segmenting it into meaningful units to identify the concepts each segment represented. The subsequent stage involved the formulation of categories and themes, where the identified codes were employed to discern overarching themes and categorise the codes accordingly. The third stage encompassed the systematic organisation of the data in alignment with the previously established codes, categories, and themes. The final stage of analysis involved attributing meaning to the data, elucidating the interrelationships among findings, establishing causal linkages, deriving conclusions, and articulating the significance of the results obtained (Baltacı 2019).

During the data analysis process, the coding was conducted by the researcher and the supervisor. Initially, the interview data were independently reviewed to identify themes and categories. Any disagreements that arose during the coding process were resolved through in-depth discussions and mutual evaluations. This approach was employed to enhance the reliability of the coding process and ensure the integrity of the data.

At this point, the positionality of the researcher and the supervisor played a crucial role in shaping the research process and ensuring its rigour. Their academic and professional backgrounds not only informed the methodological approach but also contributed significantly to the analysis and interpretation of the data.

The primary researcher is a specialist in child development, holding a bachelor's and a master's degree in the field, and currently serves as a lecturer. Her expertise in child development provided a unique perspective on analysing participants' experiences, allowing her to approach the data with a deep understanding of developmental processes. Additionally, her interest in gender-related issues informed the study's focus, ensuring a nuanced exploration of the participants' narratives. Reflexivity was employed throughout the process to critically assess and minimise any potential biases stemming from her academic and personal perspectives.

The supervisor has extensive expertise in early childhood education and gender studies. Their PhD thesis focused on gender in early childhood, and they have conducted research on gender at both national and international levels. Drawing from this strong academic and professional background, they provided critical theoretical and methodological guidance throughout the research. Their insights ensured that the research design, data collection, and analysis aligned with the study's objectives and adhered to high standards of academic rigor.

Both authors maintained a reflexive approach during the research process, critically examining how their academic backgrounds and professional experiences might influence the study. This reflexivity, combined with collaborative coding and detailed methodological documentation, enhanced the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

3 | Results

3.1 | Enquiry

The results of the investigation revealed that most participants began to interrogate their LGBT+ identities during early childhood and primary school years. The processes of questioning and acceptance were treated as separate phenomena (see Table 2). Participants reported perceiving their gender identities and/or sexual orientations as misaligned with societal norms from an early age through late adolescence, despite their inability to articulate this discrepancy.

The majority of participants revealed their gender identity and/or sexual orientation during their high school years. Buket and

TABLE 2 | Periods of participants' awareness and acceptance of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

Nickname	Gender identity/ sexual orientation questioning	Gender identity/sexual orientation acceptance
Uzay	Primary school	High School
Buket	Early childhood	High School
Ada	Early childhood	University
Ali	Early childhood	High School
Pelin	High school	University
Mert	Early childhood	High School
Yağmur	High school	High School
Flower	Primary school	University
Kedi	Early childhood	University
Güneş	Primary school	High School
Çağlar	Primary school	High School

Note: The period described by participants as ages 4–6 is referred to as early childhood, the period described as ages 7–12 is referred to as primary school, the period described as ages 14–18 is referred to as high school, and the period described as 18 and older is referred to as the university period in the table.

Kedi notably emphasised that their trans identities had begun to develop in early childhood. Kedi reported that, from a young age, she perceived the world as gender-neutral but could not understand the basis of her differing feelings. Her non-binary identity emerged early on through a rejection of the conventional stereotypes typically associated with girls.

Only Yağmur and Pelin reported that they began to question their LGBT+ identities during high school. Yağmur indicated that her questioning was influenced by her emotional interest in individuals of the same gender. Pelin expressed the process she experienced as *'if it had always existed'*:

I went to boarding school in high school. I engaged in activities such as kissing my girlfriends and doing 'pop kisses', and I also showered with my girlfriend. However, these behaviors were not common among others. Despite this, I was unable to define my own identity and was not fully aware of it.

(Pelin)

Ada indicated that she had opted to conceal her LGBT+ identity in response to the social pressure experienced by her brother, who is a queer child. She further articulated that her feelings of jealousy were, in fact, a reflection of her desire to emulate her brother.

My brother was a feminine child, and I realized that I had always suppressed my own femininity during my childhood. The fact that he was more feminine actually made me a little jealous because I was trying to suppress my own more feminine traits from a very young age and was pretending to be a more masculine child.

(Ada)

Buket and Mert, who have similar experiences, also have siblings with LGBT+ identities. Buket describes the behaviour of her twin sister, whose assigned gender is female, as masculine and interprets this situation as *'something like we were born wrong'*.

3.2 | The Selection of Play, Toys and Friends

It is observed that participants select their friends based on the gendered classification of games they choose, thereby aligning their choices with prevailing environmental norms. For instance, engagement in activities such as housekeeping and playing with Barbie dolls influenced the selection of female friends, while participation in gender-associated games like football affected the choice of male friends. Çağlar noted that, due to the fear of ostracism, he refrained from playing the games he preferred with his male friends. He often encountered questioning from his male peers, such as *'You are a man; why are you playing with this?'* Consequently, he spent more time with his female friends. It is evident that, particularly among homosexual participants, there is a general preference for female friends in their social circles.

Ada described the play process involving Barbie dolls and two Hercules action figures. Ada, who perceived these toy figures as symbolic of his own life, expressed a deep affection for the Barbie doll. He noted that he found great satisfaction in having the power to remove Barbie from the game whenever he wished.

Barbie is constantly trying to spoil the relationship and love between the two Hercules figures. I mean, I think I symbolized something as a child; there is a female figure with the toy. Actually, because I am a boy, I symbolize the heteronormativity that surrounds my life, and I am in a struggle with this system that constantly harasses me and prevents me from being myself, and it made me very happy.

(Ada)

3.3 | Coming out Process

The process of disclosing one's sexual orientation to others for the first time often coincides with the journey of self-discovery. However, in certain instances, this process may unfold in a series of distinct stages. The participants reported becoming aware of the coming-out process between the ages of 15 and 22. The decision-making processes exhibited significant variability among individuals. Factors influencing the decision to come out can be classified into the following categories: the internet, LGBT+ communities, concerns about potential reactions from family and friends, and social pressure.

As evidenced in Table 3, the majority of participants initially sought guidance from their most reliable and non-judgmental acquaintances. While some participants chose to confide in their closest friends initially, others preferred to do so within a group context. The underlying motivations for those who opted to disclose their information to friends are complex and multifaceted. The desire to meet the need for social support, to avoid deceit when sharing information about their partners in their private lives, and to introduce their partners to their friends are significant reasons cited by participants. In contrast to the majority of participants, Buket's tendency to conceal her identity is evident in the process of disclosing her sexual orientation to her friends. The data indicates that most participants first experienced coming out during their high school and university years. This suggests that, on average, individuals tend to come out to others relatively soon after these formative periods, which often align with the development of self-acceptance.

Participants Mert, Pelin, Güneş, and Ada reported experiencing a sense of relief upon disclosing their sexual orientation to their friends. They perceived that the lack of negative reactions from their friends facilitated a more straightforward process. Güneş noted that the ability to cease deceiving others following her disclosure contributed significantly to her psychological well-being.

It is very difficult to lie to close friends because they ask about your ex. Even though I don't have anyone in

TABLE 3 | Participants' family structure and the first person/people they came out to.

Nickname	Family structure	Do the parents know?	Do the siblings know?	Do any relatives know?	First person/people they came out to	Coming out age
Uzay	Traditional	No	No	No	Friend	University
Buket	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes	Family	High School
Ada	Traditional	Yes	Yes	No	Partner	University
Ali	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes	Friend	High School
Pelin	Conservative	No	Yes	No	Friend	University
Mert	Secular	Yes	Yes	No	Friend	High School
Yağmur	Modern	Yes	No siblings	No	Friend	High School
Flower	Traditional	Yes	Yes	No	Gay book ^a	University
Kedi	Secular	Mother knows, prefers not to come out to father	No siblings	No	Friend	University
Güneş	Defines her father as traditional and her mother as modern	Mother knows, prefers not to come out to father	Yes	No	Sister	University
Çağlar	Traditional	Mother knows, prefers not to come out to father	No	No	Friend	High School

Note: ^aGay book: In the Living Library, a volunteer project, books are people. People who have been subjected to prejudice by society are books and others are readers. Gay book is a concept of this project. <https://www.yasayankutuphane.org/>.

my life right now, they ask questions like what your ex was like, whether he was this or that, and if you have a boyfriend now. For example, you might say you do, but you are describing a man, not a woman. I felt freer after I said it.

(Güneş)

Within the cohort of Bi+ individuals, Kedi and Pelin encountered adverse responses from some friends. Pelin recounted an instance in which, upon disclosing her identity to a male friend, she was met with profanity, as he accused her of deceit. Conversely, Kedi's revelation was dismissed by a friend, who trivialised the admission by suggesting it was merely a bid to 'be marginal' and 'seek excitement'.

The data indicate that family structure and religious beliefs are significant factors influencing the experiences of participants in the process of coming out as Bi+. Although the parents of the participants espouse religious beliefs, the manner in which these beliefs are expressed varies considerably. Some families maintain a strictly religious lifestyle, whereas others do not exert significant religious influence. Consequently, Table 3 delineates the findings regarding family structure, focusing on the specific family members to whom participants disclosed their sexual orientation and the participants' respective interpretations.

The data indicates that participants who characterised their family structure as modern or secular encountered no adverse reactions from their families and exhibited a more accepting

attitude. On the contrary, participants who identified their family structure as traditional or conservative experienced varying degrees of difficulty during the coming out process. Notably, participants Ada, Mert, and Yağmur identified the lack of stringent religious adherence in their families as a significant factor that eased their coming out experience.

Conversely, Buket, Güneş, and Flower openly disclosed their sexual orientation to their families, who maintain devout religious practices. Buket noted that her family's attitudes underwent a transformation over time; although they initially struggled to accept her, they eventually offered support and affirmation, which they reconciled with their religious beliefs.

This is something that comes from God, not something like when I was born, someone came and injected such and such a hormone into my blood and I became like this. There is a creator, and the creator is doing this. When my family realized that this kind of thing could not come from anyone other than Allah, they did their own research and we went to a psychologist, I did, and they understood better. They thought that it was not a disease and that they should have realized it earlier.

(Buket)

My mother is also a pilgrim, that is, she is a believer in five-time prayers. She always reads the Qur'an,

but she doesn't have blinders. I mean, I am not a Muslim, but she is a woman who reflects the Muslim religion, that is, a woman who reflects the Muslim religion in a beautiful way according to them. On the contrary, when she first found out, she said to me, 'Why did you carry all this burden alone for so many years, why didn't you inform me? We would have been sad together; we would have cried together'.

(Güneş)

Uzay, Pelin, and Çağlar have not disclosed their sexual orientation to any family members. Uzay specifically cites religious reasons as the primary factor for not coming out to his mother. Çağlar explains that, due to his Eastern-rooted family background, he is unable to come out to any family members other than his mother. He cites concerns about his safety, as revealing his sexual orientation would clash with their beliefs and traditions. He particularly refrains from coming out due to threats from his brother.

Since my childhood, when I was 7 years old and not even aware of myself, my brother actually sensed that I was gay, and he was in a constant threatening mode since I was little. I mean, if someone in our family was gay, this or that would happen to him, he was making ridiculous threats

(Çağlar)

It is seen that bi+ participants are exposed to bisexual silencing during the coming out process. Similarly, Yağmur and Kedi stated that their bi+ identities were considered as a *'temporary process'* by their families in their coming out experiences. Yağmur indicated that her family did not place significant emphasis on her being bi+ since she is currently in a relationship with a boyfriend. When she initially disclosed her sexual orientation to her mother, her mother responded with the remark, *'don't make a decision without trying both'*. Kedi was also subjected to phobic reactions such as 'are you looking for excitement' when she came out to her mother.

The findings reveal that participants generally underwent a relatively uncomplicated coming out process with their siblings, often receiving positive responses. The support was notably enhanced for Mert and Ada, whose siblings identified as queer. When Mert came out to his brother, his brother disclosed his own queer identity as a lesbian. With the exception of Buket and Çağlar, none of the participants reported experiencing homophobic reactions from their siblings. Buket noted that she encountered both reactions and violence from her brother during this process.

Family attitudes have influenced coming out experiences in different ways. For example, Ali mentioned that he was ignored, particularly by his father, and that they did not speak for 2 years. In contrast, Ada said that her family supported her but wanted her to hide her identity. Although Ada described her family's attitudes as positive, she interprets their request for concealment

as a form of discrimination, expressing it as, 'To hide yourself means to live as someone else'. Similarly, although Mert also defined his family's attitude as positive, he mentioned that they asked him not to come out to their relatives. After coming out to her mother, Çağlar was advised to keep her identity concealed from the family and their surroundings, with her mother stating, 'For your safety, don't ever do such a thing'.

The families' inclination to conceal their children's LGBT+ identities from extended relatives led to a decision not to disclose these identities to such relatives, as illustrated in Table 3. Among the participants, Buket and Ali reported that their experiences of coming out to their cousins were uniformly positive, noting that the support they received from their cousins was akin to that provided by their siblings.

3.4 | Feelings After Coming out

Participants reported grappling with emotions of fear, discomfort, and a sense of unacceptance prior to their initial disclosure. For instance, Uzay mentioned that when he went to his girlfriend's, he anticipated a negative reaction to his bi+ identity, and he believed that societal misunderstandings of his bi+ identity could adversely impact the coming out process. Ali mentioned that when he decided to come out, his anxiety was triggered and he could not sleep. Ada expressed that she feared everyone she came out to would distance themselves from her and that she would no longer be able to love Ada. However, following the coming out process, all participants discussed the profound sense of liberation that their experiences afforded them.

Participants Ada, Buket, and Mert noted that their sense of empathy also evolved following the coming out process. Ada specifically mentioned that experiencing discrimination prior to coming out enhanced her empathy. Referring to her own childhood, Ada stated that the sense of empathy improved her as follows: *'If there is a pain and sorrow, it needs to be healed, and when I heal someone else, I feel like I am healing that little Ada who was hit in her childhood and excluded from the group'*. Buket, conversely, noted that the process could be significantly facilitated by an increased level of empathy from individuals toward LGBT+ persons who may face exclusion in various aspects of life.

3.5 | Support Sources for Participants During the Coming out Process

When examining the sources of support that participants received during the coming out process, it is evident that the attitudes of friends and family emerged as the most supportive factors. Participants also tried to cope with the process by writing diaries, praying, and crying in order to deal with the negativity they experienced during the coming out process. The support provided by associations, psychiatry, and psychologists for the coming out process is also noted among the findings.

Most participants stated that the positive attitude of their families also supported the process. It can be said that Buket, Mert and Ada's families' efforts to understand the process were

particularly supportive of their children. Güneş mentioned that if he had been under pressure from his family during his childhood, the process would not have worked in a healthy way. For this reason, he stated that the family is one of the greatest sources of support:

... they didn't tell me 'you're a girl, you're going to play dolls or you're going to play guns' If they had said that, I think I wouldn't have been able to discover myself so easily, I mean I wouldn't have been able to name myself so much.

(Güneş)

Buket and Mert mentioned that receiving support from psychiatry and psychologists had an impact on their families' acceptance process. Flower also mentioned that the psychiatric and psychologist support helped her during the coming out process. Pelin indicated that she ceased her sessions with the psychologist due to encountering phobic remarks regarding her LGBT+ identity.

Participants who received support from LGBT+ associations include Flower, Ada, Mert Kedi. Kedi and Ada highlighted the empowering effect of interacting with other queer individuals who volunteer at these associations. No other participants are members of such associations. The reasons cited for this include a lack of information about the associations or concerns regarding the confidentiality of information within these organisations. Çağlar mentioned that she did not feel the need for support from the association because, based on her appearance, society perceives her as cisgender, and she presents herself as heterosexual. Çağlar thinks that social pressure is also effective in applying to associations as *'If my feminine characteristics were more prominent, I think I would apply to such an association, because in such cases, the society comes down on you'*.

3.6 | Negative Experiences Influencing the Coming out Process

3.6.1 | Education Life

Çağlar, Ada and Flower defined themselves as hard-working students. While Çağlar and Ada stated that being hard-working had a positive effect on their acceptance by their teachers and friends in their educational life, Flower, on the other hand, shared that she faced exclusion specifically because of her diligent work ethic. She was ostracised by her friends for being a hard-working student in a high school characterised by low academic achievement.

When the experiences of the participants are examined, it is revealed that those whose assigned gender is male but who display feminine behaviours face significantly higher levels of discrimination. Ali, Çağlar, and Flower, who identify as homosexual, reported experiencing heightened verbal abuse and discrimination from their teachers upon the recognition of their LGBT+ identities. This adversity, they noted, significantly hindered their educational experiences. Çağlar recounted that his religious

culture teacher singled him out with specific questions during the lesson, which he believed was a response to the teacher's awareness of his LGBT+ identity. Ali and Flower were similarly subjected to exclusion by their teachers in the classroom. Flower stated that his teacher got angry at him for playing with his female friends and warned him by saying *'you will not play with them again'*. Another teacher also discriminated against her identity within the classroom setting by saying *'I think your friend is a bit "thingy"'*.

Buket and Güneş reported that they cultivated positive relationships with their teachers. Buket stated that she was the favourite student of the teachers and that her affectionate nature was effective in this. Buket expressed that, although she did not come out to her teachers, they were nonetheless sensitive and supportive regarding her identity. It is among the findings that teacher attitudes are affected by the sociocultural level of the high school attended by the participants.

...society is like that, they didn't say 'he's behaving in a masculine way, that's what he is', on the contrary, they always gave me nice nicknames. 'Sergeant come here' ... You know, my professors and so on, they liked me, they were more interested in communicating with me, maybe because of where I live, I live in Muğla. Muğla is open-minded about this issue, I mean, it's not like Konya. Go to Konya and see what happens, the stones will kill you.

(Güneş)

3.6.2 | Peer Bullying, Violence, and Harassment

Consistent with the observations in the participants' educational experiences, it can be asserted that those assigned male at birth encountered homophobic attitudes and peer bullying due to attributes such as a feminine appearance and nonconformity to prevailing social norms. They generally experienced peer bullying in the form of verbal violence against the participants such as 'ball', 'faggot', 'bitch'. It is evident that they experienced peer bullying as a result of not participating in football while changing in physical education class. Ali mentioned that during secondary school, he had a conflict with a friend who insulted him by calling him 'you are a ball' (referring that he's gay) and this verbal abuse escalated into physical violence. Çağlar stated that when his classmates became aware of his sexual orientation, they increased their verbal violence and phobic behaviour toward him. It can be seen that the bi+ female participants and Güneş, who has a lesbian identity, were not subjected to verbal violence in this way.

Ada and Çağlar stated that peer bullying transforms from verbal violence to physical violence and that violence grows over time by feeding phobic behaviours. The hostility and aggression exhibited by Ada's peers toward her gradually intensified, ultimately manifesting in harmful actions directed at other living beings. It was stated that the same peers used the term *'faggot's dogs'* to describe the stray dogs that Ada took care of, and that they engaged in harming behaviours. Çağlar expressed that his

adverse experiences necessitated self-defence and resilience, leading him to mature early. He further explained that having endured phobic behaviour throughout his life, he developed strategies to avoid violence when anticipating it, such as ingratiating himself with the aggressor or persuading them to de-escalate the situation.

Female participants revealed that merely being a woman in our country is sufficient to invite verbal harassment. Pelin and Kedi recounted that as children, their male classmates would attempt to lift their skirts and subject them to harassment through inappropriate gestures, such as lewd hand movements. Among the bi+ participants, Uzey and Pelin stated that bisexuality is perceived differently by society and that being treated as if everyone they meet is emotionally or physically attracted to them leads to harassment. Uzey explained that the verbal violence she experienced from her partner because of her bi+ identity also became physical. Uzey is hesitant to open up to her partners due to the negative experiences she has previously endured.

... he thought and declared that he would be jealous of me from women as if I was flirting with every person who came in front of me and that this was a problem. I can say that this scared me a little more in explaining myself to my next partners if I come out. Because the first thing that came directly to my mind was that if I tell my current partner that I am bisexual, will they react like my past partner, or will they not like this situation, or will they see this situation as too sexual and pull me to a different point.

(Uzey)

Buket, similar to the other participants who were assigned female at birth, recounted experiences of verbal harassment due to her feminine behaviour as a trans woman, with one of the perpetrators being a married relative. As highlighted by Pelin and Uzey, reducing LGBT+ identities to purely sexual terms exacerbates the severity of such harassment.

3.6.3 | Religious Beliefs and Societal Pressure

Participants listed religious beliefs and social pressure feeding each other as negative factors in the process of coming out; except for Buket, there is no participant with a strong religious belief. However, during their childhood, Flower and Çağlar noted that traditional views shaped by religious beliefs significantly influenced their perception of LGBT+ identities. Flower expressed that she believed suppressing her LGBT+ identity would lead to religious rewards in the end. Similarly, Çağlar shared that he repressed his sexual orientation because being gay was deemed unacceptable by religious standards. However, he noted that his emotional relationships improved significantly after he became an atheist at the age of 21. Çağlar stated that since his brother is a heterosexual person, even if he acts against religious rules, this is not a problem, and he defined this as 'hypocrisy'.

... the Qur'an says not to commit adultery and while my brother was telling me these things, he couldn't even count the number of women he had been with while he was being a moral guardian, you know, he couldn't even count the number of women he had been with and even my family was aware of this, but since he was hetero, these sins did not cause much trouble from a religious point of view.

(Çağlar)

Families wanted their children to hide their LGBT+ identities so that they would not be exposed to negative experiences such as exclusion or violence in their social lives. At this juncture, it becomes evident that participants who perceive the inclination to conceal one's LGBT+ identity as a manifestation of phobia themselves choose to suppress their identities, believing that their families do so out of a protective instinct.

4 | Discussion

Most participants began questioning their LGBT+ identity in early childhood but had difficulty understanding it then. Ryan (2009) found that same-sex attraction often starts around age 10, with some recognising it as early as 7-9. Participants' interests in gendered toys, like Barbie dolls, reflected personal preference rather than social norms. Gender norms influenced friendships and activities. Li and Wong (2016) noted girls' empathy and supportive play, aligning with gay participants' closer relationships with female friends.

Participants often begin accepting their queer identities and coming out in high school or university (Cox et al. 2010; Kosciw et al. 2015). They rely on supportive friends and positive reactions to aid the process and challenge social norms (Kabacaoğlu 2015). Most participants disclosed their LGBT+ identity to at least one family member, though some concealed it for safety and to avoid negative reactions or social pressures. Research shows that coming out to family is often one of the most challenging experiences for LGBT+ individuals (Broad 2011; Ece 2017; Gonzales et al. 2016; Heatherington and Lavner 2008; Klein and Golub 2016; Legate et al. 2012).

Participants from modern or secular families experienced greater acceptance when coming out, often suppressing their identity rather than changing their beliefs (Wheeler 2013). Buket, a religious participant, viewed her transgender identity as a divine test. According to Islam, from a jurisprudential² perspective, homosexuality is strictly forbidden, with harsh penalties prescribed³. In some Christian traditions, LGBT+ individuals may be excluded from faith communities, facing conflict between religious doctrines and their sexual or gender identity. Some follow religious teachings and lead heterosexual lives, while others reject these doctrines to embrace their identity (Wilcox 2000).

Participants received positive feedback from siblings when disclosing, emphasising the role of sibling relationships in social development (Feinberg et al. 2013; Sulloway 2010). Lesbian and gay siblings often experience stronger bonds and better communication (Hilton and Szymanski 2011). Negative reactions

were more common from male siblings, with women generally showing more positive attitudes toward LGBT+ individuals (Ben-Ari 1995).

Support from friends and family is crucial, with parental acceptance improving mental health (Shepherd 2019; Reyes et al. 2020). While some avoid LGBT+ associations due to confidentiality and homophobia (Amnesty International 2011), mental health support is often necessary due to life challenges (Richards et al. 2018; Holmes 2011; Zunner and Grace 2012).

Participants face significant pressure and violence due to societal norms enforcing heterosexuality, with common harassment (Özbal and Deniz 2015; Kaos-GL 2013). Those assigned male at birth with feminine behaviours experience increased bullying. Supportive teachers can reduce violence (Kosciw et al. 2008), but 84% of LGBT+ individuals face derogatory labels and 91% experience homophobic harassment (Mondimore 1999; Kosciw 2004). Female participants and bi+ individuals, especially women, face intensified harassment, reflecting ongoing gender inequality and entrenched norms (Szymanski and Kashubeck-West 2008; Barker et al. 2012).

The lack of LGBT+ policies in Turkey harms participants' childhoods and underscores the need for reform. European countries offer better support, while Turkey's narrow hate crime definition excludes protections for sexual orientation and gender identity. Article 122,⁴ of the Turkish Penal Code, which came into force in March 2014, [1] only covers hate crimes related to 'language, race, nationality, colour, sex, disability, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion or sect'. The provisions of the Turkish Penal Code⁵ addresses legally punishable hate crimes but lacks coverage for categories like sexual orientation and gender identity. Participants suggest that power dynamics and the heterosexual framework reinforce each other, with heterosexism portraying LGBT+ individuals as pathological or deviant.

In conclusion, participants' experiences show that gendered interactions start at birth and persist throughout life, shaping roles in family, relationships, education, and work. Childhood experiences significantly influence adult perspectives, with ongoing stigma and discrimination reflecting minimal change in societal gender norms.

5 | Based on the Findings, the Following Suggestions Are Made to Better Support LGBT+ Children and Address Societal Gender Norms

For researchers, it is important to conduct more studies on child development that specifically focus on LGBT+ children, in order to better understand their unique challenges and develop effective solutions. Collaborating with professionals from various fields, such as social workers, mental health experts, and educators, can help design comprehensive support programmes for LGBT+ children and their families. To ensure the findings are inclusive and representative, researchers should include diverse participant groups from different backgrounds and identities. Furthermore, exploring the experiences of individuals who are struggling to accept or disclose their identities is essential for capturing a wide range of perspectives and providing insights

into the emotional and mental struggles many LGBT+ individuals face.

For parents, maintaining open communication about gender identity and sexual orientation is crucial, as it allows children to feel supported and loved unconditionally. Educating themselves on gender and LGBT+ issues will enable parents to better understand their children's experiences, reducing confusion or uncertainty. Additionally, creating a safe space free from stereotypes and harmful biases allows children to express themselves authentically without fear of rejection. Seeking professional or peer support when needed can also help parents navigate challenges and ensure they are providing the best support possible for their child.

For educators, creating inclusive classrooms that respect gender diversity and use gender-sensitive language is essential to fostering an environment where LGBT+ students feel seen and respected. Promoting tolerance and awareness through training programs for both teachers and students can reduce stigma and create a more empathetic atmosphere within schools. Supporting LGBT+ students with the appropriate resources and collaborating with families ensures that the students receive well-rounded, comprehensive care that addresses both their academic and emotional needs.

Author Contributions

Gizem Çelebi: writing – original draft, methodology, data curation.
Sevcan Yağan: writing – review and editing, project administration.

Disclosure

The authors have nothing to report.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1002/icd.70027>.

Endnotes

¹ *Benim Çocuğum* translates to 'My Child', referring to a documentary that explores the experiences of parents of LGBT+ individuals in Turkey.

² In Islamic jurisprudence, the whole of the rules related to religion and world affairs, which are established by utilising the main sources (TDK 1988).

³ For detailed information, see Qur'an: 7:81, 27:54–55, 26:165–166, 29:28–29.

⁴ <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.5237.pdf>.

⁵ See also the articles of the Turkish Penal Code that can be related to hate crime cases.

Turkish Penal Code—Article 3 (Principle of justice and equality before the law).

Turkish Penal Code—Article 115 (Preventing the exercise of freedom of belief, thought and opinion).

Turkish Penal Code—Article 122 (Hate and discrimination).

Turkish Penal Code—Article 125 (Insult).

Turkish Penal Code—Article 153 (Damaging places of worship and cemeteries).

Turkish Penal Code—Article 216 (Inciting the public to hatred and hostility and humiliation).

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Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Could you tell me a little about your family? (Family size, socioeconomic and sociocultural structure, religious beliefs, lifestyle?)
2. When did you first realise your gender identity/sexual orientation? Could you share a specific event related to this realisation?

3. Was there a particular game or toy you enjoyed during childhood?
4. Did your choice of games and toys influence your choice of friends?
5. At what age did you experience your first coming-out process?
6. To whom did you first disclose your gender identity/sexual orientation?
 - a. How did you decide to come out?
 - b. Which family member/friend did you come out to first?
 - c. How did you feel after coming out?
 - d. What factors made the coming-out process easier or harder?
 - e. How did your family/friends react?
 - f. Did their attitudes change after you came out?
7. Did your life change after coming out?
8. What could have made your coming-out process easier?
9. Were there family members or friends you wanted to come out to but couldn't? Why?
10. Did you experience any discrimination in education due to your gender identity/sexual orientation during childhood?
11. Were there areas where you experienced exclusion during childhood?
12. Did you encounter bullying, violence, harassment, etc., during childhood due to your gender identity/sexual orientation?
13. Were there people or institutions that supported you during childhood? How did you cope with your challenges?
14. What is the impact of your childhood experiences on your current personality?
15. If you were to describe your experiences with a metaphor, what would it be?