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"I'm Coming Out":
The Role of Music in LGBTQ+ Identities

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Abstract

Research shows that music holds great importance to the LGBTQ+ community. However, only a handful of studies have explored personal and private music consumption and particularly its role in individual identity formation and the coming out process – typically, with a focus on gay men and lesbians. This experiential qualitative study explored the role of music in LGBTQ+ identities before, during and after the coming out process. Data were collected from 30 participants who identified as LGBTQ+ and/or in the process of coming out using an online qualitative survey; four of these participants also took part in follow-up interviews. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, generating three themes: 1) Music to come out to; 2) Queer artists promoting individual authenticity, pride and empowerment; and 3) Queer music for community and belonging. The findings can inform the work of music therapists, music educators and community musicians working with LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

Keywords: bisexual; pride; qualitative survey; queer; reflexive thematic analysis; trans

Introduction

This experiential qualitative study explores the role of music in LGBTQ+ identities, before, during and after the coming out process. We use the terms LGBTQ+ and "queer" interchangeably to denote a diverse group of individuals who identify with sexual and/or gender identities outside of heterosexual and cisgender norms (Dunlap, 2017; Wasserbauer & Dhoest, 2016); we also use the term queer to refer to theories that reject cisheteronormative sexual and gender ideologies (Bain et al., 2016). The term "coming out" is often used to describe when a person shares their LGBTQ+ identity with others, however, we use this term both to capture that and when a person recognises and acknowledges their LGBTQ+ identity for themselves (Dunlap, 2017). To contextualise this

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research, we briefly overview research on the coming out process and the psychological functions of music in adolescence, and then we discuss existing literature on the role of music in LGBTQ+ identities and coming out.

The LGBTQ+ Coming Out Process

One of the core queer experiences and challenges is forming an identity as LGBTQ+ in a cisheteronormative social context. Queer identity exploration and coming out are tasks associated with adolescence, but as some scholars have noted, in the context of research on queer music subcultures, queer folk often experience a "stretched out adolescence" (Halberstam, 2005) or "post-youth" (Taylor, 2012), especially those who come out later in life. Thus, queer identity exploration and coming out can be conceptualised as an adolescent task even if not undertaken during gerontological adolescence. This said, research indicates that younger cohorts *are* coming out at earlier ages (Bishop et al., 2020; Grov et al., 2006). Therefore, for younger queer folk, identity exploration and coming out are increasingly (gerontological) adolescent tasks, especially for those in more liberal contexts.

Queer sexual identities encompass attraction, (potentially) sexual activity, self-identification as queer, (potentially) sexual/romantic relationships and, for many, involvement in queer subcultures and communities. The term transgender refers to a range of gender identities that involve "conflict between someone's sex assigned at birth (SAAB) and felt gender" (Hunter et al., 2021, p. 1182) including binary gender identities (e.g., identifying as female when assigned male at birth) and non-binary gender identities (which can be referred to with other labels such as gender queer, agender and gender fluid). Transgender and gender diverse identities similarly encompass self-identification and, for many, identification and involvement in LGBTQ+ subcultures and communities. Different identity models describe the formation of a queer identity—realising and accepting queer feelings—as a potentially long and painful process (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015). Such identity models initially only described coming out for gay men and lesbians, most notably clinical psychologist Cass's (1979) classic six-stage model of homosexual identity formation. However, in subsequent decades, queer identity formation models have encompassed bisexual and transgender identities (e.g., D'Augelli, 1994; Devor, 2004).

Dunlap (2017) describes the queer coming out process as beginning when an individual starts to recognise that their lived experience does not match up with society's cisheteronormative expectations. Models such as Cass's capture a process of moving from this "identity confusion" stage, with queer individuals questioning their sexual/gender identity and recognising their queer feelings. Identity confusion is followed by gradual acceptance, seeking out other queer individuals/community, then a prideful immersion in queer subculture, and finally the integration of queerness with the whole self. Transitioning from a majority identity to a minoritised identity can be a struggle for many LGBTQ+ youth (Bain et al., 2016; Rosario et al., 2006), as most LGBTQ+ identified individuals "are not raised in a community of similar others from whom they learn about their identity and who reinforce and support that identity" (Rosario et al., 2006, p. 46). Further, openly identifying as LGBTQ+ may have emotional, social, physical, and legal repercussions which may interfere with identity development (Bain et al., 2016). Thus, the support (or lack thereof) an individual receives from their social network and family can be influential in the coming out process (Carrion & Locke, 1997).

The Role of Music in Adolescence

Laiho (2004), in a comprehensive review of the literature on the role of music in adolescence, suggested that music has unique characteristics—such as influencing moods,

reflecting adolescent concerns and portability—that can help improve adolescent coping and mental health. Furthermore, music plays an important role in adolescent tasks such as identity formation, and adolescent needs such as a need for belonging and peer relationships, and for emotional regulation. Music is thought to be particularly relevant for adolescents, and music encountered during adolescence—a stressful period marked by change and emotional turbulence—is especially resonant and influential (Laiho, 2004; Miranda, 2013; Wasserbauer, 2021). Laiho (2004) described music as helping to regulate and legitimise emotions, and providing a refuge for practising difficult emotions that can later be openly expressed (see also Miranda, 2013). With regard to identity, "music is a means to explore, define, and celebrate our sense of self, and to make us feel more fully ourselves" (p. 54; see also Miranda, 2013). By closing a bedroom door or wearing headphones, music listening can create a private space for exploring the "fragile concept" (p. 54) of the uncertain self.

Laiho (2004) also argued that music can be perceived as a reliable/constant friend that provides companionship and decreases loneliness, can evoke feelings of unity and belonging, and through shared listening or participation, can enhance connection with others, and help establish and strengthen social networks. Musical preferences can signal identification with a particular social group (see also Miranda, 2013) and playing favourite songs to others is a way to express thoughts and values, and "through songs people can speak of something they wouldn't have the courage to talk about otherwise" (p. 55). Miranda (2013) noted that musical artists can function as role models, influencing identity development through social learning. These findings suggest that music is likely to play a significant role in queer identity formation and coming out.

The Role of Music in LGBTQ+ Identities and Coming Out

The connection between LGBTQ+ identities and music has been studied by musicologists and sociologists of music in key volumes like *Queering the Pitch* (Brett et al., 2006) and *Sexing the Groove* (Whiteley, 1997). Research has focused on specific artists and fans of specific artists—typically female singers and the phenomenon of diva worship (e.g., Lady Gaga, kd lang; Jennex, 2013; Valentine, 1995; Wasserbauer & Dhoest, 2016), themes in queer music and music consumption (e.g., Dhaenens & Burgess, 2019; Dhoest et al., 2015; Reger & Heintz, 2023), queer music making (e.g., gay choirs; Henderson & Hodges, 2007; MacLachlan, 2015), queer music genres (e.g., opera; Kostenbaum, 1993), festivals (e.g., Duffy et al., 2007) or scenes (e.g., Amico, 2001; Taylor, 2010), or phenomena like the Eurovision Song Contest (e.g., Lemish, 2004). Research has typically focused on (white, presumably cisgender) gay men and to a lesser extent (white, presumably cisgender) lesbians living in western countries. There is little research on other queerly identified folk, including trans and gender nonconforming folk, and queer folk of colour (Dhoest et al., 2015). Across existing research, music plays an important role in providing gay men and lesbians with a sense of belonging and community, and in constructing collective queer identities. This research tends to focus on how music and music making is used *after* coming out, and often with a focus on public consumption and collective participation (in choirs, the scene, fandoms, watching the Eurovision Song Contest and live music) (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015). Only a handful of studies have explored the role of music *before* and *during* coming out, and personal and private music consumption (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015; Hardie & Johnston, 2015; Wasserbauer, 2016, 2021). Similar to the wider literature on music and LGBTQ+ identities, this research has principally focused on white, presumably cisgender lesbians and gay men.

Across two papers drawn from a wider study of music in the lives of LGBTQ+ people in Belgium, Wasserbauer explored the role of music in coming of age for six lesbian/queer women aged 23–51 years (Wasserbauer, 2016), and for three gay men, one lesbian/queer

woman and one participant identified as gender fluid (whose experiences are also explored in Wasserbauer, 2019) aged 18–33 (Wasserbauer, 2021). Both papers summarise the stories of the individual participants rather than draw out themes across participants' experiences of music. This research highlights the importance of queer role models who create a new frame of possible identities and can represent queer folk in public, especially when they are coming out. Music was also reported to contribute to the discovery of fluid and nonnormative sexual and gender identities, enable connection with other queer folk, and queer folk to explore their place in society. Wasserbauer (2021) concluded that: "Music is a valuable tool in helping us negotiate and come to terms with our sexual and gender identities, and it strengthens our sense of self during queer coming-of-age" (p. 285).

Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) interviewed seven Israeli gay men about the role of music in their coming out process. The men were aged 18–75 and mostly began the process of coming out in their teens and early twenties. Five indicated that music was important in this process. The authors reported that for these five participants music played three main roles: (1) as their main or only companion before coming out and when they were lonely and isolated (echoing Laiho [2004]'s description of the role of music in adolescence), providing connection to an imaginary community; (2) as helping to regulate the extent to which they revealed to others their queerness and true self, with "straight music" concealing, and "gay music" revealing; and (3) as a catalyst for "coming out," with participants announcing they were gay through their musical choices, and music giving them the courage to come out to others.

Hardie and Johnston (2015) explored the role of music as an imagined closet during the coming out process—a place of both hiding/concealing and refuge/safety and belonging—for ten UK and New Zealand lesbians aged 27–34, most of whom came out in their 20s. Music could create private safe spaces—a musical closet—in the family home and in public spaces, and a way of resisting heteronormativity and a space to retreat to when feeling unsafe (see also Laiho, 2004). Music as a musical closet also provided an imagined utopia where the authentic self could be performed, reducing feelings of isolation and marginalisation, and creating a sense of connection to other lesbians.

Research is particularly limited in relation to music and gender identity. Several studies have explored trans people's creation of musical performance videos on *YouTub*e from lip-synch to composing and performing their own music to express themselves and their gender (Chen, 2016; Jennex & Murphy, 2017; Raun, 2010). Cayari (2022), for example, reported a case study of an established *YouTub*e musician and how music-making and performing enabled her to tap into new understandings of her identity, and come to terms with and express her trans identity. Wasserbauer (2019) explored music and identity for three gender nonconforming trans people living in Flanders, Belgium, and found that music making and consumption was essential for self-expression, exploring and forming identity, and freeing the self from gender normative expectations. Queer and trans musical artists created new frames of possible identities, and could express what participants couldn't. Participants connected to artists (such as Dana International and Conchita Wurst) and lyrics who/that expressed being different and freeing oneself from heteronormative gender expression.

Across all this research a definition of queer music emerges: music perceived to be connected to queer culture (Dhoest et al., 2015), including certain musical genres such as disco, commercial pop, house music, and musical theatre, and music associated with camp and divas, often reflecting (white) gay male music preferences.

We aim to build upon existing research on the role of music in coming out by exploring the use of music by LGBTQ+ people before, during and after the coming out process.

Methodology

Design

We explored the lived experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ people using an online qualitative survey and qualitative interviews. An online qualitative survey offered participants a strong feeling of "felt anonymity" (Braun et al., 2021), and this method has been used in several existing studies on queer music for that reason (Dhoest et al., 2015; Jennex, 2013). An online survey also had the practical advantages of easily allowing participants to share links to significant songs and to complete the study when and where they preferred (Braun et al., 2021). Interviews afforded participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences in greater depth and detail. We analysed the data using reflexive thematic analysis (TA), taking a constructivist approach, which "acknowledges that subjective meanings are formed through interactions with others and historical and social norms in the lives of individuals" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 190). A favourable opinion was received from authors' Faculty Research Ethics Committee and the British Psychological Society's (2021) Code of Human Research Ethics was adhered to throughout the research.

Researcher Personal Statement

This research focus was initially inspired by the first author's (FA) own experience of the role of music in her coming out process—music allowed her to explore her sexual identity in a safe non-judgemental environment. Living in a rural area of the UK as an adolescent, she used music as an emotional outlet when unable to talk to others about her queer feelings. Listening to music and writing songs enabled her to express these feelings and explore her own queer identity, since she had no access to a LGBTQ+ community (in person or online) and there was very little LGBTQ+ representation in the media.

The FA identifies as a lesbian and cisgender, the second author (SA) as queer and non-trans[1], and the third author as straight and cisgender. Although the FA and SA identify as members of LGBTQ+ community, we are aware that we do not share the same lived experiences as every other individual in the LGBTQ+ community—we are both white and middle class, the FA is currently non-disabled and the SA is disabled. The FA used her reflexive journal to maintain her awareness of her own assumptions and feelings on the topic.

Participants and recruitment

Thirty participants completed the survey and four of these took part in online follow-up interviews, providing a dataset with sufficient "information power" (Malterud et al., 2016) or information richness to address the research question. Participants were recruited through purposive "sampling" (Braun & Clarke, 2022)—calls for participants and a digital poster, including the survey link, were shared on various social media platforms, and emails were sent to LGBTQ+ organisations and university LGBTQ+ societies in the UK. The FA and SA also shared details of the study with their personal networks. The criteria for recruitment were that participants must be aged 16 or over, and identify as LGBTQ+ or as in the process of forming a LGBTQ+ identity. The participant information sheet noted that the FA was a member of the LGBTQ+ community and music played a helpful role in her coming out process and provided a link to the SA's staff profile on the university website and highlighted their research experience in LGBTQ+ psychology (see Appendix).

[1] We use non-trans to open up a space between trans and cisgender, and between feelings and (publicly claimed) identities.

We hoped that the FA being open about her LGBTQ+ identity and sharing her personal experiences with the participants on the participant information sheet and during the interviews (disclosing her identity as a gay woman) would help to build trust and rapport with participants. We acknowledge, however, that we should have gone further—clearly stating the FA and SA's sexual and gender identities, and our white and middle-class positioning, and the FA's positioning as currently non-disabled and the SA's positioning as disabled on the participant information sheet.

The participants had a mean age of 29 (range 19–72) years, and were predominantly LGB identified ($n = 25$) and white ($n = 25$), and more diverse with regard to gender identity, disability, and social class. Participant demographics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Self-identified Demographics.

Demographic Category			**Number of Participants**
Age (Years; Researcher categorised)	Life Stage	Age	
	Adolescence	16–25	11
	Younger adulthood	26–44	14
	Middle adulthood	45–64	3
	Older adulthood	65+	2
Sexuality (Self-described)	Gay/Lesbian/Queer		14
	Bisexual		11
	Asexual		3
	Pansexual		2
Gender Identity (Self-described)	Non-binary/gender queer/diverse/nonconforming/fluid		11
	Female/Cisgender female/Woman		8
	Male/Cisgender Male		8
	Trans man/masculine		2
	Cisgender*		1
Coming Out Status** (Researcher categorised)	Fully out		18
	Partially out		11
	Not specified		1
Coming Out Age (Researcher categorised)	Life Stage	Age	
	Childhood	Under 16	8
	Adolescence	16–25	15
	Younger adulthood	26–44	6
	Middle adulthood	45–64	0
	Older adulthood	65+	1

Demographic Category		Number of Participants
Racial/Ethnicity (Self-described)	White	22
	White + Jewish/Jewish heritage	3
	Mixed White + Asian	2
	Asian	1
	Black	1
	Question not understood	1
Social class (Self-described)	Variant of middle class (upper, lower)	16
	Working class	11
	Don't know	2
	Complicated	1
Disabled	No	19
	Yes (physical, mental health, multiple)	11

Note: * This participant did not identify themselves as male or female.

** Participants were asked an open-ended question about where they were in their coming out process. As several wrote "fully out" we use that language here to categorise participants responses. Some participants implied they were "partially out" regarding their sexuality and others provided different responses for their sexual and gender identities (e.g., fully out for sexuality, partially or not out for gender)—these participants are categorised as "partially out".

Qualitative Survey and Interview Questions

The online survey, which was delivered via the Qualtrics survey platform, included a participant information sheet followed by a consent question, the substantive survey questions, open-ended demographic questions requesting self-description of gender identity, sexuality, race/ethnicity, social class, and disability, and an invitation for participants to provide an email address if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview, and/or would like to receive access to the Spotify playlists curated from the songs mentioned by participants. A further Qualtrics survey was used to obtain consent for the interviews.

The substantive survey questions consisted of open-ended questions about the participants' personal experiences and use of music, and music making, in relation to their LGBTQ+ identity, and membership of the wider LGBTQ+ community (for the full survey including the demographic questions, see Appendix). The questions were informed by existing literature—for example, following Aronoff and Gilboa (2015), we asked about "coming out" songs, following research on queer music making (e.g., Henderson & Hodges, 2007), we included questions on composition and music-making, and, following research on the role of music in the "scene" (e.g., Taylor, 2010), we asked about the role of music for participants in LGBTQ+ community spaces. The FA's reflections on her rural upbringing, and wider literature on differences in the experiences of urban and rural LGBTQ+ youth (e.g., Agueli et al., 2022), also informed the inclusion of a question about the role of location (e.g., rural, urban) in the participants' relationship with music when coming out. When the survey data was compiled for analysis, any identifying information was removed.

Eleven survey participants expressed an interest in taking part in an interview. The ten participants who provided an email address were contacted by the FA and invited to

participate in an interview. Only four responded to this invitation and all were interviewed. The four interviews each lasted approximately an hour and were conducted by the FA. The interview questions were guided by the participants' individual survey responses and the participants were invited to discuss their responses in greater depth. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) orthographic transcription notation system; identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

Data Analysis

The survey responses and interview transcripts were treated as one dataset and analysed together, with the process led by the FA. The analysis was data driven and inductive following the six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive TA. To familiarise herself with the data, the FA read through the dataset several times, changing the reading order each time and documenting her reflections in a reflexive journal. The SA also read through the dataset and the FA and SA met to share their reflections and preliminary insights. The FA then coded the data, with a focus on semantic coding to "give voice" to the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.174). She then clustered the codes by "identifying shared patterned meaning across the dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35) to generate initial themes. She created a visual map to develop and review the provisional themes, revisiting the dataset and her initial thoughts on the data recorded in her reflexive journal. She also met with the SA to review and reflect on the initial themes. The analytic process ended with the creation of three themes: 1) Music to come out to; 2) Queer artists promoting individual authenticity, pride and empowerment; and 3) Queer music for community and belonging. The themes are illustrated with excerpts from the survey responses and interview transcripts. Any superfluous text within the excerpts has been replaced with […]. Survey participants are designated as SP followed by the number 1–30, and interview participants as IP followed by the number 1–4. Participants have been allocated pseudonyms and their ages, sexuality and gender identity are identified when quoting from their survey responses or interview transcripts.

Two Spotify playlists were curated from all the songs listed in participants' responses, one for LGBTQ + identity/coming out and another for LGBTQ + community and belonging (see Appendix).

Analysis

Although we didn't ask participants specifically about the notion of queer music (apart from a reference to "LGBTQ + songs" in one survey question) many referenced "gay music," "gay pop" and "gay anthems" in their responses in a way similar to Aronoff and Gilboa's (2015) participants referenced "gay music" "as if it is a natural and widespread concept" (p. 431). A few bisexual participants also referenced the notion of "bi anthems" (SP22, bisexual cis, aged 25), and named specific songs as "the bisexual anthem!" (SP27, bisexual cisgender female, aged 22). "Gay music" was often specifically associated with gay men, and with the genres and types of music identified in previous research such as musicals, pop/commercial, female musicians and divas, and dance music (e.g., Dhoest et al., 2015; Jennex, 2013; MacLachlan, 2015; Taylor, 2010; Wasserbauer & Dhoest, 2016). Ashleigh's description of gay music was typical:

> "the traditional gay music like the *Kylie Minogues,* the you know the the real pride type music, *The Veronicas* and you know […] kind of iconic, stereotypical gay men music […] So it's kind of like this real rainbowy fun time kind of music. I don't know how they picked the the gay icons. ((laughs)) I don't know how it came about, but it is. It's kind of like that party. You know, kind of cliche poppy type. Dancy. Really happy fun music." (IP1, pansexual "I am a

lady at work and a tom boy at home", aged 42)

There was also reference—mostly by cisgender participants—to music and artists who engage in "gender play" (SP30, lesbian genderqueer, aged 39), "test the boundaries" (SP13, bisexual cis female, aged 24) of gender and explore "how we can have fun with it and not take it so serious" (IP2, gay male, aged 24). For some participants, queer music *was* their coming out music, for others, the music that was important to them when coming out wasn't necessarily queer music (including music by queer artists), but music that allowed them to express themselves and show who they are, often performed by artists who were perceived as freely and authentically expressing themselves through their music and in their performances (Wasserbauer, 2019). These definitions of queer music likely reflect the predominance of white LGB people in the participant group.

Theme 1: Music to Come Out to

The first theme explores the role of music in shaping participants' LGBTQ+ identities and their coming out process. This theme mainly focuses on sexuality, as many participants reported that music enabled them to discover, explore and express their sexual identity. Some participants discussed that it wasn't possible to explore feelings about gender identity through music, because of a lack of music focused on gender identity—"I didn't find any" (SP30, lesbian genderqueer, aged 39)—and a lack of gender diverse artists. As Jamie stated: "In terms of my gender identity, I don't think music particularly made any difference to me. I think a reason for this is that I don't recall any songs I've heard explicitly discuss trans topics" (SP17, bisexual trans male, aged 22). While music helped Jamie to normalise and celebrate "queer love," coming out as trans was "very much a journey I had to travel on with myself."

As in previous research (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015; Wasserbauer, 2021), not all participants connected music to coming out, but most did, and for those who did—such as Liam—music was often very important in their lives:

> "Music has played a big part in loving myself, you know. And it's influenced me so much because it's allowed me to express myself creative creatively and express myself unapologetically, you know? I think it's had a huge impact on my life. And I think I wouldn't be the same person I am today without it, you know?" (IP2, gay male, aged 24)

Many participants named songs that they felt held importance for their queer identity, and, in response to a question about coming out songs, some identified songs that they felt represented their coming out process (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015); others indicated that they didn't have a specific coming out song. The artists that were popular among the participants included *Girl in Red*, *King Princess*, *Christine and the Queens*, *Hayley Kiyoko* and *Panic! at the Disco*. For some participants, music was their "awakening" (IP3, bisexual cis female, aged 24) and helped them to realise and recognise their queerness (Wasserbauer, 2019, 2021). Many participants reported that music helped them to process and clarify emotions when exploring their queer identity. Ella expressed the emotion she felt when starting to discover her sexual identity through listening to a song:

> "The song 'girls' by girl in red was actually one of the first starting points to me questioning my sexuality. I remember laying in bed one night listening to the song through my headphones, and suddenly I just burst into tears because it all made sense. The song really rang true with me, and I realised that it wasn't just boys I liked, but girls too." (SP27, bisexual cisgender female, aged 22).

Participants stated that music and music fandom also helped them to explore and develop a queer identity, whether consciously or not. Some participants noted that they gravitated

more towards queer music and artists before realising their own queer identity. Emily shared how she felt she unconsciously but safely explored queer feelings through her admiration for Jessie J:

> "I was able to be 'in love' with a female singer just because they were famous. I used to have a poster of Jessie J on my bedroom wall which was quite provocative for a 12 year old but because she was a musician it was okay. It allowed me to talk freely about women in a way that I may not have found without music" (SP13, bisexual cis female, aged 24).

This echoes Wasserbauer's (2021) participants, some of whom described an intuitive connection to queer music and coming out through crushes on queer artists. Wasserbauer argued that queer music and artists broaden one's sexual horizons, and spell out queer feelings that one is not yet able to express, and queer folk may recognise themselves in queer music or a queer artist.

For other participants in the current study, music wasn't discussed in terms of helping them to realise their queerness but in terms of helping them to express it, whether it was doing so without having to come out to anyone, or whether it enabled them to freely express these feelings with others in a society where it is not always safe to do so, because of wider cisheteronormative expectations. Liam conveyed that music helped him to express himself in secret before coming out to others: "It was a way for me to express myself without letting people know that I was gay and a sense that I could listen to these songs secretly and not have any judgments on it because obviously I wear headphones" (IP2, gay male, aged 24). Liam's experience resonates with Hardie and Johnston's (2015) conceptualisation of music as a safe and mobile closet—a way for queer folk to be their authentic selves, even if only temporarily. Liam reflected on "just how freeing it was knowing that for those three minutes or however long the song was. I could be who I was. And not who I'm walking around being." Liam's experience is also similar to Aronoff and Gilboa's (2015) notion of music as a means of concealing and revealing queerness, and helping queer folk to manoeuvre between their hidden/private authentic queer self and their false heterosexual public identity before coming out. This split between private and public selves before coming out has been referenced in a number of existing studies (e.g., Hardie & Johnston, 2015; Valentine, 1995).

Music can not only express emotions through lyrics but can also convey emotions and meaning through the instrumentation and performance of an artist (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015). Jamie compared the expression of instrumentation in music to queer feelings: "As opposed to simply a poem, the instruments, melodies, and performances backing up the lyrics create much more complex listening experience. I find it fitting because a lot of queer feelings are complicated" (SP17, bisexual trans male, aged 22). A small number of participants compared music to other expressive modalities such as poems, television and film. These participants thought that music provided greater scope for re-interpretation, allowing them to easily change elements of a song to project their own experiences on to it, such as the pronouns in lyrics (Dhoest et al., 2015). Interview participants Jessie (IP4) and Emily (IP3) both explained why music is more open to queer re-interpretation than other media:

> "You're told that story very precisely [in television and film], but with music, you're kind of more given an idea of something or a fragment of someone's experience, and then you can kind of project your own experience onto it" (IP4, lesbian genderqueer, aged 39).

> "if I want to change the pronouns to a song, I can. And it can still mean the same thing. Umm, but I can't watch *Titanic* and just flip the genders of the characters. It doesn't work like that." (IP3, bisexual cis female, aged 24)

Many participants discussed how they came out to others through music, noting that queer artists, music and music videos can act as a communication tool to enable LGBTQ+ individuals to indirectly communicate queer feelings to others, when a declarative and direct coming out can be a complex and difficult process (Rosario, 2006). Emily shared how the music of a gay icon was her "route in" with a family member she lived with and how she communicated her bisexuality to her friend by using the music video for the song "Angel Eyes" by *New Year's Day*: "I remember saying to my friend 'I don't know if I'm more jealous of Chris or Ash' and it took her a moment to understand what I meant because it was the first time I'd expressed an interest in any women in that way" (SP13, bisexual cis female, aged 24). Music was also used to give participants the courage to come out to others: "I made a 'coming out' playlist to motivate me when I came out to my family" (SP20, Asexual and biromantic gender-fluid female: aged 30). Music was used to more directly communicate queer feelings and identities to others. Taylor explained that he came out to others through posting music on social media: "The first time I came out, I shared the Coming Out song by Ally Hills onto Facebook!" (SP03, queer trans masculine, aged 20).

For some participants the songs they identified as coming out songs not only provided affirmation of their queer identity after coming out, but also relatable lyrics that captured some of the emotions of their coming out process and a joyful celebration of their coming out and queer identity. Lucas described his coming out song as reflecting the difficult feelings of keeping his queer identity "closeted" and the relief he felt after finally coming out: "Shakira: She-Wolf. […] it's totally relatable about having a so-called monster in your closet (society tells you you're the monster in the closet) but eventually you let it out so it can breathe and you feel all the better for it" (SP10, gay cisgender male, aged 34). For Liam, his coming out music was "more empowering now than it was before […] Because now that I'm living my true self, I can sort of express myself through this song [*Rihanna* "S&M"] freely now, whereas before I was hiding it a bit" (IP2, gay male, aged 24).

One participant in their mid-twenties—Grace—stated that they felt that they "would've come out a lot earlier" (SP29, bisexual cisgender female, aged 26) if there were more artists representing the LGBTQ+ community and songs that related to their identity, when they were growing up. Similarly, another participant—Nigel—in his late 40s reflected on how his coming out process could have been different if he was younger:

> "I only came across this one recently, but it feels surprisingly important to me: I Know a Place by MUNA. I'm so moved by this song in a number of ways. It gives me goosebumps because it is such an assertion of our value and worth and community. I'm moved by the existence of this song—that it is possible to be so straightforwardly gay and open. I can't imagine how extraordinary it would have been to have a song like this when I was growing up and understanding myself." (SP09, gay male, aged 49)

Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) reported that for their participants music didn't have a special role after coming out and those that had coming out music stopped listening to it. Some of our participants had stopped listening to their coming out music, but others continued to listen to it and other queer music as this music affirmed their queer identity, and provided a celebration of their coming out journey. Others no longer specifically sought out their coming out music, but discussed how when they heard it, it reminded them of that time in their lives and the feelings surrounding coming out.

Some of the popular song choices and anthems named in this research paralleled earlier studies (e.g., Dhaenens et al., 2019), such as "I'm Coming Out" by *Diana Ross*, "Born This Way" by *Lady Gaga*, "I Kissed a Girl" by *Katy Perry* and "Girls like Girls" by *Hayley Kiyoko*.

Theme 2: Queer Artists Promoting Individual Authenticity, Pride and Empowerment

Some participants stated that queer artists openly being themselves and breaking down gender stereotypes and norms, gives other queer individuals the reassurance, motivation and confidence that they need to openly live as their true self (Reger & Heintz, 2023; Wasserbauer, 2016, 2021). *Kim Petras*, *Christine and the Queens*, *Janelle Monae*, *King Princess* and *Troye Sivan* were the most commonly named queer artists by the participants. When asked if it was important for a musical artist to share the same identity as them, most participants felt that the music created by an artist was paramount, with a shared identity being "an added bonus" (SP17, bisexual trans male, aged 22) or "the icing on the cake" (SP14, bisexual womanish, not very cis but not trans at all, aged 52). This parallels Dhoest et al.'s (2015) finding that the sexuality of the artist was mostly understood by their participants as incidental or secondary to the music; knowing a favoured artist is LGB is a "nice extra" (p. 215; see also Wasserbauer, 2016).

However, there was a sense in some participants' responses that there are legitimate and illegitimate reasons for liking music—that the music should be more important than the artist—and alongside this a sense that queer people shouldn't be defined or pigeonholed by their sexuality/gender identity, that music should speak to the whole/other parts of the self, not just queerness. Isabella even cautioned us "not to stereotype what music people find is important to them and their identity" (SP14, bisexual womanish, not very cis but not trans at all, aged 52).

At the same time, many participants acknowledged that representation within music, and the music industry, was "important" (SP18), "helpful" (SP22), and "really key" (SP27), if not for them personally, then for other queer folk, especially adolescents, and the wider queer community. Some participants, like Jessie, who weren't themselves bisexual discussed the importance of representation for bisexual people: "it is important for bisexual people to have that representation and […] to see and hear their own experiences represented, through the lyrics, I think that's really important" (IP4, lesbian genderqueer, aged 39). Several bisexual participants referenced specific songs—such as *Panic! At The Disco's* Girls/Girls/Boys—and artists as important representations of bisexuality. Grace specifically acknowledged the importance of trans artists to trans people: "I know that Kim Petras generally is important to a lot of my friends who are part of the LGBT, but especially because she is a well known trans woman" (SP29, bisexual cisgender female, aged 26). It's important to note of course that not all queerly-identified artists are publicly out or open about their sexuality/gender identity, and those who are perhaps "quietly" out but do not conform to queer appearance norms may not be perceived/read as queer.

For some participants queer artists enhanced their enjoyment of music: "knowing that music and/or its artist is explicitly queer makes that an even more joyful experience" (SP21, lesbian, questioning, probably somewhat non-binary, aged 25). A number of participants indicated that the music of openly queer artists was more relatable when coming out than the music of non-queer artists as there was a stronger connection with the participants' lived experience, with the lyrics reflecting their own queer feelings and the marginalisation of their emerging queer identity in a cisheteronormative social context. Grace explained how her coming out song, "Honey," sang by queer artist *Kehlani*, reflected and affirmed her queer feelings: "one of the first songs where I heard a woman singing about other women and I related to that so much. When I first heard it, I felt like 'wow, this song is openly gay and that's okay!'" (SP29, bisexual cisgender female, aged 26). Grace came out in her adolescence; as such her experience affirms Bain et al.'s (2016, p. 23) suggestion that LGBTQ+ adolescents may listen to music "congruent with their sexual identity" during the identity development process. However, some participants came out in later adulthood and music often played a similar role for them. Grace further shared

that the music of queer artists helped her to recognise and process her internalised homophobia in a heteronormative society: "Girls by Girl in Red is also important to my identity. It kind of talks about your feelings surrounding same sex attraction, and how it's somewhat an inner battle of dealing with feeling that way, but also how society doesn't want you to" (SP29, bisexual cisgender female, 26).

A few participants suggested that the music of queer artists created a sense of empowerment, enabling them to embrace their queer identity. Ben discussed that encountering queer artists expressing who they are and being authentically themselves, helped him to accept and express his own queer identity:

> "Being aware of musicians who were proud of their sexuality, their different clothing, use of makeup, lyrics etc… all really helped me express myself more truthfully, and helped me accept who I am" (SP16, bisexual male, aged 66).

Olivia stated that success of queer artists in the music industry, motivated them to be proud of their queer identity: "Seeing LGBTQ+ artists' increasing success in music motivates me even further in taking pride of my identity" (SP20, asexual and biromantic gender-fluid female, aged 30). For Olivia, she was empowered by queer, Mexican *and* Jewish artists:

> "Seeing them break barriers, and being unapologetically themselves motivates me to be ever more open about my own identity. This applies not only about LGBTQ+ artists. I am also Jewish and Mexican, so I look up to artists such as Haim or Natalia Lafourcade." (SP20, asexual and biromantic gender-fluid female, aged 30)

Here Olivia highlights other aspects of her identity and the importance of music reflecting and speaking to these. This echoes Wasserbauer and Dhoest's (2016) study of queer music fandom in which one participant identified by the authors as having a "Moroccan background" (p.34) described his affinity for *Om Kalsoum*, "the big diva of classic Arab music" (p. 34) because her music was connected to his sexual identity and predominantly to his Arab identity.

Theme 3: Queer Music for Community and Belonging

This theme explores how queer music helped to create a sense of community and belonging for the participants. Participants discussed music as a shared experience and a way of connecting to queer communities, whether through communal listening or listening alone, providing a feeling of inclusion in and belonging to a wider community, echoing research on the role of music in adolescence more broadly (Laiho, 2004; Wasserbauer, 2021).

Some participants mentioned that favourite artists and their music were like "a good friend" (SP06, bisexual male, aged 72), "my friendship group" (IP2, gay male, aged 24), or "a sort of companion" (SP21, lesbian questioning, probably somewhat non-binary, aged 25)—similar to the participants in Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) and Wasserbauer (2016)—as they provided LGBTQ+ individuals with a sense of unconditional support and belonging (see also Laiho, 2004). For some, this was especially the case when they were an isolated and "lonely teenager" (SP06, bisexual male, aged 72). Ashleigh described music as a "constant" in her life as the music she listened to was "always my friend and the musicians that I listen to were always there" (IP1, pansexual "I am a lady at work and a tom boy at home," aged 42). For Liam, music was "that friend": "We can go to because we know we're not gonna be judged. We know we're not gonna be feared. You know, we're gonna be accepted with open arms. I think that's why music I think is so powerful for us because we feel loved" (IP2, gay male, aged 24).

Jessie (IP4, lesbian genderqueer, aged 39) discussed the accessibility and portability of

music—"music can kind of come with you"—which enables LGBTQ+ individuals to access this unconditional support anywhere, whether listening through headphones in secret, or sharing with others. This resonates with Laiho's (2004) argument that the portability of music is important to its ability to support adolescent mental health and identity development and Hardie and Johnston's (2015) notion of music as a mobile closet.

Participants stated that the music of queer artists helped them to feel less alone and provided a sense of belonging through shared experiences. Jessie expressed their gratitude to music for helping them to feel connected to the LGBTQ+ community: "They make me feel less alone and like I'm part of something, not a weirdo that doesn't fit in with the people immediately around them. Some of the lyrics are like 'ah, someone finally understands'" (SP30, lesbian genderqueer, aged 39). Liam could be part of the LGBTQ+ community "without telling anybody" (IP2, gay male, aged 24) through privately listening to queer music.

Some participants also mentioned that listening to the music of queer artists enabled them to feel connected to the LGBTQ+ community before they had come out, and or when they did not have physical access to LGBTQ+ community spaces. Amelia described how music helped them to feel a sense of belonging before coming out to others in their life: "Made me feel connected to the community when I wasn't out, expressing feelings I have that I might not be able to share with anyone else in my life. They might not understand but I know others feel as I do as I hear it in their songs" (SP05, ace/bisexual female/non-binary, aged 27). Harry felt connected to the LGBTQ+ community when listening to queer music alone: "Listening to this [queer music] feels connecting even when I'm alone listening to it—it feels shared. It also feels like an expression of freedom and joy that has roots in my gay identity" (SP28, gay male, aged 34).

Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) questioned whether music will continue to play a companion role during the coming out process, because of the accessibility of LGBTQ+ communities and information online, noting that their participants mostly came out a decade or two ago, before the development of social media. Our participant group had a much wider age range than Aronoff and Gilboa's participants, but similarly, just over half had come out within the last decade, and most ($n = 25$) within the last two decades (at the time of data collection in 2023), so mostly *after* the development of social media. Our research suggests that social media increased the accessibility of queer music for participants and enabled them to more readily use music to explore and express their sexual identity. As previously noted, several participants in their twenties described music as a "friend," which suggests that although younger LGBTQ+ individuals have more access to information and community online, music continues to play an important role in their coming out process. Furthermore, as Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) themselves noted, music can play a greater role in the lives of queer folk who experience greater social isolation including those from conservative cultures and communities. It's notable that in our survey, LGBTQ+ individuals living in rural areas without access to physical LGBTQ+ community spaces only responded in terms of music listening, whereas participants in urban areas with access to LGBTQ+ community spaces also wrote about communal listening and participation. This suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals in areas without physical LGBTQ+ community spaces may rely on (solo) music listening more when coming out, than LGBTQ+ individuals with access to such spaces.

Participants stated that the fandoms of queer artists and allies can also connect and bring LGBTQ+ individuals together from all around the world, creating a sense of community through social media and attending live music performances (Wasserbauer, 2021). Isabella shared how the music fandom of the band *My Chemical Romance* enabled them to make friends with other queer individuals: "They have a noticeably queer following and although I am much older than their usual fanbase I have found innumerable queer friends around the world because of them" (SP14, bisexual womanish, not very cis but not trans

at all, aged 52). For one of the bisexual participants, Chloe, queer music provided a way of connecting to the community when in straight passing relationships/not visibly queer, not feeling safe or not interacting with other queer folk: "Music has felt like a useful and validating way to stay connected to my community when I am either in a place where it doesn't feel safe to be out, or where I am not able to actually interact with other queer people" (SP22, bisexual cis, aged 25).

Participants said that being surrounded by other individuals listening to music in LGBTQ+ venues or when attending a live music performance of an artist who either represents or supports the LGBTQ+ community, created a safe atmosphere and a sense of belonging where queer individuals can feel free to openly be who they are, without fearing for their safety in a public place (Jennex, 2015). As Liam noted "you almost feel home" (IP2, gay male, aged 24), and music can "help us connect together as a community, especially in like clubs and things like that" (IP2, gay male, aged 24).

Jessie (IP4) discussed the feelings of inclusion at live performances by artists popular in the LGBTQ+ community:

> "gigs where the musician is gay and then like a lot of the crowd is gay and to be in that room full of people where it's like you're not the only gay in the room ((laughs)) […] that was quite powerful as well." (IP4, lesbian genderqueer, aged 39)

A few participants mentioned that they felt connected to other queer individuals whilst singing gay anthems and well-known songs together in LGBTQ+ spaces, enabling them to communicate and express shared emotions. Jamie (SP17) described the feeling of connectedness when singing with other queer individuals: "Everyone can sing and dance and scream the lyrics at the top of their lungs, and we connect in expressing the feelings those songs give us, together" (SP17, bisexual trans male, aged 22).

This echoes the findings of existing research such as Jennex (2013) which shows that music creates a sense of belonging for gay fans, as not only does music connect through listening to queer artists, but it also connects through participation in music fandom, bringing queer individuals together online and at venues for live performances, where they can feel safe to openly be "who you are" (SP12, lesbian/queer cis woman, aged 27).

General Discussion

This research echoes existing research—both that focused on collective participation and identities, and on individual consumption, and identity formation and coming out—in highlighting that music can hold great importance and meaning for LGBTQ+ individuals and communities (e.g., Jennex, 2013; Wasserbauer & Dhoest, 2016). It also affirms existing research on the role of music in adolescence particularly with regard to identity formation and meeting needs for emotional regulation, and a sense of belonging; with LGBTQ+ artists and allies serving as role models and surrogate friends for some (Laiho, 2004; Miranda, 2013). As discussed, there were numerous intersections and overlaps between our analysis and the findings of existing research on the role of music in LGBTQ+ identity formation and coming out, particularly studies by Aronoff and Gilboa (2015) and Hardie and Johnston (2015). Although, unlike the participants in Aronoff and Gilboa (2015), some of our participants highlighted the on-going importance of their coming out music *after* coming out. The popular song choices and anthems named in this research also paralleled that in previous studies (e.g., Dhaenens et al., 2019) and participants often related more to queer music and artists, than to non-queer music.

Study Evaluation and Suggestions for Future Research

With regard to age, most of the participants were adolescents and younger adults ($n = 25$)

and all but one participant reported coming out in their childhood, adolescence or early adulthood, with adolescence the most common period for coming out. This means the research largely does not capture the coming out and identity formation experiences of older generations of LGBTQ+ folk, and the role music played in these. It also largely does not capture the experiences of those coming out later in life, and the role of music when coming out in later life. However, some of the aged 25+ participants reflected rather wistfully on the role queer music could have played in their coming out if queer music and queer artists were more visible and accessible when they were growing up. Furthermore, as previously noted just over half of the participants had come out within the last decade, and most ($n = 25$) within the last two decades (at the time of data collection in 2023), so mostly *after* the development of social media. Future research could explore both the coming out experiences of older generations and experiences of coming out later in life, and the role of music in these, *and* the role of music in the coming out experiences of post-social media generations of younger millennials and generation Z.

Although the participants reported a somewhat diverse range of sexual and gender identities (most identified as LGB, and more than half as cisgender), most identified as white (see Table 1). The artists discussed in this research were also predominantly white. One participant highlighted the importance of non-white/ethnically minoritised artists to their ethnic identity, echoing a participant with a Morrocan background in Wasserbauer and Dhoest's (2016) research on queer music fandom. As a result of telling this participant's fandom story, Wasserbauer and Dhoest (2016) cautioned against a narrow focus on just sexuality in future research on queer music, and emphasised the importance of exploring the intersections of race/ethnicity and sexuality. On reflection, we realised that we approached the study through a white normative lens and did not sufficiently attend to intersections of LGBTQ+ identities with race/ethnicity, disability, social class etc. As noted in the methodology, the FA and SA should have gone further in positioning themselves in the participant information sheet—such disclosures could have helped build trust with, for example, people of colour by acknowledging our racial privilege. We could have also included survey questions about identity intersections. Our recruitment strategies were clearly unsuccessful in recruiting larger numbers of people of colour. White middle-class researchers recruiting through their personal networks is acknowledged to produce participant groups that share these positionings (Braun & Clarke, 2013); and using traditional recruitment avenues (e.g., LGBTQ+ organisations) likely excludes people who aren't part of (potentially white homonormative; Vo, 2021) LGBTQ+ networks and communities (McCormack, 2014). We invite other white researchers to learn from our experience and innovate in their recruitment strategies and rely less on traditional routes to secure more racially and ethnically diverse participant groups. We also encourage other white researchers to learn from our failures with regard to reflexivity and intersectionality and engage in more thorough-going reflexivity around their positioning and worldview—particularly when designing research instruments and developing recruitment strategies—and embed intersectionality (Boggan et al., 2017) into their research practice. As well as learning from our failures, researchers interested in the role of music in coming out for racially and ethnically marginalised groups, could also fruitfully explore queer music cultures and communities centred on people of colour such as the Black queer and trans+ ballroom scene in the US and Canada (Joseph & Bain, 2024).

Most existing research has focused on gay men and lesbians, whereas around half the participants in our study identified as bisexual ($n = 11$), asexual ($n = 3$) or pansexual ($n = 2$). Bisexual specific representation—in song lyrics, music videos and among artists—and bisexual music/anthems were mentioned as important by some bisexual participants, but there were no mentions of asexual or pansexual representation, and asexual and pansexual participants often referenced their identities using general terms such as queer or LGBTQ+. One pansexual participant described their exclusion from the "gay

community" and that music liked by gay men may not be the preference of other members of the community. We think further specific exploration of the musical experiences of bi, pan and ace individuals is necessary to fully understand the psychological function of music in polysexual and asexual identities and coming out and to move beyond a narrow focus on gay men and lesbians.

Although we were somewhat successful in recruiting a diverse participant group with regard to gender identity (with 13 participants identifying as trans and gender diverse), no trans women participated in the research. Previous case studies have highlighted the importance of musical performance for trans identity formation and coming out (e.g., Cayari, 2023; Chen, 2016; Jennex & Murphy, 2017; Raun, 2010) and a study specifically focused on gender nonconforming trans folk highlighted the importance of trans and drag artists to the participants (Wasserbauer, 2019), however, the trans masculine/male and gender diverse participants in this study indicated music listening mostly played little role in their gender identity coming out process because of a lack of trans/gender identity focused music and openly trans artists. Three participants did mention *Kim Petras* who became more widely known in 2023 as a result of commercially successful and award-winning collaborations with mainstream artists such as *Nicki Minaj* and *Sam Smith* (the latter identifies as non-binary). Troia (2023) describes Petras' self-presentation as at the "normative end" of trans-femininity (p. 9), which raises the question of transnormativity (Glover, 2016)—including the embodiment of white normative femininity—and its pervasiveness in representation of trans women in the media. Trans musicians—like Mya Byrne—have shared their frustration with the challenges trans musicians face in the music industry and the ways trans musicians are "far behind" LGB artists in terms of visibility, with successful trans artists typically white pop stars (Cassata, 2019). This lack of visibility is also reflected in online articles with titles like "15 transgender & non-binary artists you need to know" (Goetzman & Daw, 2023), clearly positioning the reader as likely not knowing these artists. This suggests that our participants' accounts of a lack of trans and gender diverse artists are perhaps better understood as a lack of *visible/mainstream* artists. Further research on the role of music consumption in the gender identity coming out process is clearly warranted.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of music in LGBTQ+ identity, before, during and after the coming out process. Most participants expressed the importance of music in helping them to realise and express their queer identity, and come out to others. Solo and communal consumption of queer music helped create a sense of community and belonging for participants, and queer artists and allies were viewed as playing an important role in promoting queer pride and empowerment. The findings suggest music has great potential to support LGBTQ+ coming out, identity formation and maintenance. This research can inform music therapists, community musicians and music educators working with LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

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Appendix

Information provided about the first author and second author in the participant information sheet

Who is the researcher and what is the research about?

Thank you for your interest in this research 'Exploring the role of music in LGBTQ+ identity'.

My name is Karen Jones, and I am a postgraduate student in the School of Health and Social Wellbeing, University of the West of England, Bristol. I am completing this research for my MA Music Therapy dissertation project. My research is supervised by Dr Victoria Clarke (see below for her contact details). Victoria's UWE staff profile provides further details of her research in LGBTQ+ psychology.

In the research I will explore the role music plays during the "coming out" process and within the LGBTQ+ community, and whether it creates a sense of belonging and to determine if there are any themes in the music, lyrics and feelings expressed. I found music very helpful during my "coming out" process and wondered whether this was true for others in the LGBTQ+ community. There has been little research written about LGBTQ+ identity and music, and I believe it is an important area of research that is needed in music therapy practice, that has the potential to promote greater understanding of LGBTQ+ identity.

Survey questions and preamble

Exploring the role of music in LGBTQ+ identity
A note on terminology

The questions in this survey relate to the role of music in exploring and expressing LGBTQ+ identities—we use the terms 'sexuality' and 'gender identity' throughout the survey, but please use whatever terms you prefer. Please answer the questions in relation to whatever LGBTQ+ identities are relevant to you—this can be just sexuality, just gender identity, or both. If both sexuality and gender identity are relevant to you, you might not have one answer to each question (e.g., in relation to Question 1 you might have a clear sense of your sexuality but not your gender identity)—please answer each question in whatever way makes most sense for you.

The term 'coming out' is used throughout the survey—this term can be used to refer to both the process of developing an understanding of your own sexuality and/or gender identity for yourself, and disclosing that to others.

1. Where are you in your 'coming out' process?

2. Do you think music has been helpful in the process of making sense of your sexuality/gender identity?
   Please explain why or why not.

3. Has your location (e.g., rural, urban) shaped how important music has been in your 'coming out' process?
   Please explain why or why not.

4. Do you have a 'coming out' song(s)?
   Please detail song title(s) and artist(s) and/or provide a link to the song(s) on YouTube/Spotify.
   Please explain why these songs are important to you.

5. Do you have any songs that are important to you in relation to your sexuality/gender identity more broadly?
   Please detail song title(s) and artist(s) and/or provide a link to the song(s) on YouTube/Spotify.
   Please explain why these songs are important to you.

6. Are there any songs that help you feel connected to the wider LGBTQ+ community?
   Please detail song title(s) and artist(s) and/or provide a link to the song(s) on YouTube/Spotify.
   Please explain why these songs are important to you.

7. Have you ever written lyrics/poems or composed songs as an outlet for your feelings about your sexuality/gender identity? Did you find it helpful?
   If no, do you think it could be helpful?
   Please explain your answer.

8. Have you ever written a song for the LGBTQ+ community? Did you find it helpful?
   If no, do you think it could be helpful?
   Please explain your answer.

9. Are LGBTQ+ songs/artists important to you as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?
   Please detail song title(s) and artist(s) and/or provide a link to the song(s) on YouTube/Spotify.
   Please explain why these songs/artists are important to you.

10. Is it important if a musical artist shares the same identity as you?
    Please could you explain why or why not.

11. Do you think that LGBTQ+ songs/artists are important to the LGBTQ+ community?
    Please detail song title(s) and artist(s) and/or provide a link to the song(s) on YouTube/Spotify.
    Please explain why these songs/artists are important to the LGBTQ+ community.

12. If you spend time at LGBTQ+ spaces and venues (e.g., bars, clubs, community spaces), please list the type(s) of venue below. What role does music play in these venues for you?

13. Do you participate in any music-based LGBTQ+ groups (e.g., choirs, jam sessions, bands, music groups, online music-based community, meet-ups, gigs)?
    If yes, what type of group(s)? Please explain why participating in these groups is important to you?
    If no, do you think it could be helpful? Please explain your answer.

14. Is there anything else you want to tell me about the role of music in your LGBTQ+ identity?

Some questions about you

In order for me to learn about the range of people taking part in this research, and to describe the broad characteristics of my participant group in my report, I would be grateful if you could answer the following questions. Please write your answer in the space provided. All these questions are optional—if you prefer not to answer a question, please leave the space blank. Please note that the information provided by all participants will be aggregated.

How old are you?

If you have 'come out' (sexuality, gender identity or both), roughly how old were you?

How would you describe your gender identity?

What are your preferred pronouns?

How would you describe your sexuality?

How would you describe your racial/ethnic background? (e.g., White; Black; White Jewish; Asian Muslim)

How would you describe your social class?

Do you consider yourself to be disabled?

If yes—please tell me about the nature of your disability.

Spotify playlists
Songs have been arranged in order of participants' age groups starting with adolescents.

Identity/Coming out playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1PPoyhw65jtJfJNoCHBCH?si=4d7ad03424d946f9

Community and belonging playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/62wrHquzP8hTvc282D86PB?si=48ce7e076a654d00