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Descriptive Finding

The demography of sexual identity development and disclosure among LGB people in Europe

Anna Caprinali

Agnese Vitali

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Descriptive Finding

The demography of sexual identity development and disclosure among LGB people in Europe

Anna Caprinali[1]

Agnese Vitali[2]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
Despite a non-negligible share of youth in Europe identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, we know little about the demography behind the development and disclosure of one's sexual identity, particularly regarding their timing and their variation by LGBTQIA identity. This limited understanding hinders the use of sexual orientation as a predictor in social sciences.

OBJECTIVE
We provide descriptive evidence on the demography of sexual identity development and disclosure among LGB people in Europe. We focus on age at self-disclosure and age at first coming out to others and describe differences across European countries, birth cohorts, and between lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.

METHODS
We use the 2019 EU LGBTI II Survey data administered by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and employ descriptive statistics, t-test, and survival analyses to investigate age at self-disclosure and first coming out.

RESULTS
The age at self-disclosure has remained stable across successive cohorts of LGB people in Europe, whereas the age at coming out to others has decreased considerably. Accordingly, the gap between age at self-disclosure and age at coming out to others has reduced across cohorts. However, longer age gaps are consistently observed among LGB men across all cohorts and countries. Age at self-disclosure varies considerably across Europe, being highest in Central European countries and lowest in Eastern European countries.

[1] Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy. Email: anna.caprinali@unitn.it.
[2] Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Italy.

CONTRIBUTION

This contribution offers the first systematic description of the age at self-disclosure and coming out in Europe and how they vary according to LGB identity, cohort, and country.

1. Introduction

The recent inclusion of questions aimed at measuring respondents' sexual identity in European surveys such as the German Socio-Economic Panel, the UK Household Longitudinal Survey, the UK 2021 Census, the Millennium Cohort Study, Statistics Norway's Quality of Life survey, and the Swedish National Public Health Survey, is bound to give rise to a new stream of research on the demographic outcomes of non-heterosexual individuals, frequently in comparison to heterosexual individuals (Badgett, Carpenter, and Sansone 2021). A small but growing literature has started to analyse their labour market outcomes (Aksoy, Carpenter, and Frank 2018; Buser, Geijtenbeek, and Plug 2018; Flage 2019), health outcomes (Liu and Reczek 2021), educational attainment (Boertien, Perales, and Pessin 2024; Mittleman 2022), and family formation and fertility (Boertien, Perales, and Pessin 2024; Caprinali, Vitali, and Cortina 2023; Evertsson and Boye 2018; Ophir, Boertien, and Vidal 2023).

While sexual orientation is becoming recognised in stratification research as a determinant of life chances (Badgett, Carpenter, and Sansone 2021), we still know little about sexual identity milestones (i.e., pivotal experiences and/or events in the personal journey of self-discovery of sexual orientation and/or gender identity; see Martos, Nezhad, and Meyer 2015). In particular, we know little about the age at which individuals fully acknowledge their sexual identity through self-disclosure; i.e., the age when Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer/Questioning Intersex Asexual (LGBTQIA) individuals first identify as such, and the age at first coming out to others. Knowledge of these processes, their variation by LGBTQIA identity and across countries is key to fully understanding the mechanisms driving the associations between sexual identity and a range of demographic and socioeconomic outcomes. Indeed, sexual orientation – unlike more 'traditional' stratification factors – is not predetermined at birth but rather developed or discovered over time (Saewyc 2011) and can be fluid over the life course (Hu and Denier 2023). Understanding the timing of sexual identity milestones is therefore necessary to disentangle and better understand the role of sexual orientation in stratifying socioeconomic outcomes. The age at which individuals recognize and acknowledge their sexual identity can shape key life decisions, such as educational or career choices. For instance, Beattie, Van Dyke, and Hagaman (2021) highlight how the timing of identity development significantly influences mental health, self-acceptance, and academic

outcomes, which may in turn affect broader socioeconomic trajectories. Earlier acknowledgment may allow LGB individuals to adapt more readily to societal expectations. Similarly, coming out is salient because it exposes individuals to potential discrimination, bullying, and judgment (Hall, Dawes, and Plocek 2021). Coming out earlier may therefore limit LGB people's access to opportunities and resources in a discriminatory environment, reinforcing socioeconomic disparities.

Our study investigates heterogeneities in sexual identity development among lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) individuals in Europe, focusing on age at self-disclosure and age at first coming out, two critical turning points in the lives of LGBTQIA people. These two ages mark the moments when LGB people start to take their sexual identity into account when making choices and become (more openly) vulnerable to discrimination, bullying, and judgement, all impacting their life chances. We aim to describe variation in the age at self-disclosure and coming out by LGBTQIA identity, cohort, and country (RQ1) and to understand whether and how these heterogeneities overlap and are intertwined (RQ2).

The study draws on the stream of literature focused on "sexual orientation development" (Saewyc 2011), which views sexual orientation as a progressive developmental process based on patterns of attraction and behaviour (Hall, Dawes, and Plocek 2021). Previous literature based on the USA has mainly focused on identifying the 'developmental milestones' and their order and common paths, in order to create stage-sequential models of sexual orientation development. This research also highlights significant heterogeneity in milestone timing based on demographic characteristics (Martos, Nezhad, and Meyer 2015): gay boys tend to have earlier milestones than girls and bisexual people, and younger LGB cohorts experience earlier milestones and a reduced gender gap in age at self-disclosure (Dunlap 2016; Hall, Dawes, and Plocek 2021; Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000).

We hypothesise similar differences in demographic aspects (gender and age) in Europe. Bisexual people tend to face more stigma than gay men and lesbian women (Mize and Manago 2018); accordingly, and in line with the US literature, we expect them to discover their sexual identity and disclose it to others later than their gay/lesbian peers (H1). As younger cohorts have grown up in more tolerant and inclusive societies (Dunlap 2016), we expect younger cohorts to both discover their sexual identity and come out to others earlier than older cohorts (H2). Finally, for Europe we expect to also find differences across countries. Agreement among the general population that gays as lesbians should be free to live their lives as they wish varies considerably across countries (Dotti Sani and Quaranta 2020) and different countries offer a considerably different set of rights to LGB couples, ranging from equal rights to marriage and filiation as for opposite-sex couples (e.g., Netherlands, Scandinavian countries, Spain) to none or alternative forms of marriage and no filiation (e.g., Italy, Poland, Hungary). We rely on

country of residence to gain insight into how cultural differences might similarly matter in Europe and hypothesise that people living in countries that legalised same-sex marriage earlier – where attitudes toward LGB people are generally more positive – might discover their sexual identity and come out earlier than others (H3).

2. Data and methods

We used the 2019 EU LGBTI II Survey data promoted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). This survey investigates the experiences and opinions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals living in Member States of the European Union (EU), including the UK, Northern Macedonia, and Serbia. Respondents participated on a voluntary basis due to the lack of a reliable sampling frame for the LGBTI population in Europe. To reduce bias, multiple recruitment channels were used and FRA calculated weights to compensate for misrepresentation in different strata of the target population. More information on the survey, sampling, and weights is available in the technical report released by FRA (FRA, 2020) and in the GESIS data repository.

To date, the FRA survey is the largest (N = 139,799) and most comprehensive study on the LGB population in Europe. While non-representative, these data allow for comparisons across contexts defined by heterogeneous norms and attitudes toward the LGB population across European countries.

We employed descriptive statistics and t-test analyses to determine the statistical significance of differences between groups, and survival analyses to describe the time to self-disclosure and disclosure to others. The sample comprises self-identified LGB individuals; hence all respondents experienced the event of self-disclosure. We exclude respondents who declared the age at self-disclosure after the age at first coming out (N = 398).

We used survival analyses to account for potential selection bias at younger ages, which arises when the average age at self-disclosure for younger cohorts is underestimated due to the exclusion of individuals who self-disclose at older ages. To address this, we restricted the sample to individuals who self-disclosed before age 25. This cut-off aligns with the survey design, where the youngest respondents fall into the 18–25 age range. By setting the cut-off at 25, we ensure comparability between younger cohorts (aged 15–24 at the time of self-disclosure) and older groups, which were similarly restricted to those self-disclosing by age 25. Respondents enter the risk of self-disclosure at birth, and those who had not disclosed by the time of the survey are right-censored.

2.1 Variables

We measured age at self-disclosure and age at first coming out on the basis of the following survey questions: 'How old were you when you realised for the first time you are/you first told somebody you are [respondent category – Lesbian women, Gay men, Bisexual women, Bisexual men]?'. We then computed the gap between the two ages (age at first coming out to others – age at self-disclosure). If respondents were categorized as 'transgender' they were asked the same questions but about self-disclosure of their gender identity and first coming out as a transgender person; for consistency, we excluded these observations and included only cisgender LGB participants.

As main independent variables we used sexual identity (Gay man, Lesbian woman, Bisexual man, Bisexual woman), cohort (calculated using age groups), and country of residence.

2.2 Data limitations and sample description

Age at self-disclosure and age at first coming out were asked retrospectively, hence the answers may be imprecise, especially among older respondents. Similarly, the cross-sectional nature of the survey limits our ability to account for the fluidity of sexual orientation over the life course.

In the absence of a sampling frame for the LGB population in Europe, respondents are selected, and the sample cannot assure representativeness of the population of interest (i.e., the European LGB population). The majority of respondents are gay men, representing 50% of the sample, while the smallest group is bisexual men, 6% of the sample. Sixty-two per cent of the sample is less than 30 years old. Accordingly, the number of respondents in older age categories is small, especially among bisexual groups, impeding running three-way analyses. When observing the distribution of identities by birth cohort, more than the 50% of bisexual people are in the 1995–2004 cohort with bisexual girls outnumbering lesbian women in the youngest cohorts, while gay men have the highest frequencies and are more evenly distributed across cohorts. Also, the geographical distribution of respondents is skewed, with the majority of respondents living in the most populated European countries, particularly in Spain. To partially correct for these selection problems, we used weights in the analyses.

3. Results

On average, LGB people in Europe discover their sexual identity shortly before their 16th birthday and come out at about 20 years old. This implies that, on average, they disclose to others about 4 years after acknowledging their sexual identity. Eight per cent of the sample reported never having come out to anyone. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics by sexual identity and t-test.

Gay men self-disclose their LGB identity at least 3 years earlier than lesbian women and bisexuals. While the mean age at self-disclosure for gay men is about 14 years of age, all the others have mean ages above 16. With the exception of bisexual men – who tend to disclose to others later (mean = 21.74) – all other LGB identities come out to others around age 20. Remarkably, bisexual and lesbian women have the shortest gap between self-disclosure and coming out and gay men the longest. On average, women acknowledge being LGB later than gay men but come out earlier (confirmed by the t-test). Lesbian women also have the highest rate of disclosure to others (97.74%), while bisexual men have the lowest, with only 77.18% of bisexual men reporting having come out to someone. This may be related to the stigma surrounding bisexual people and is in line with previous literature (Doan and Mize 2020).

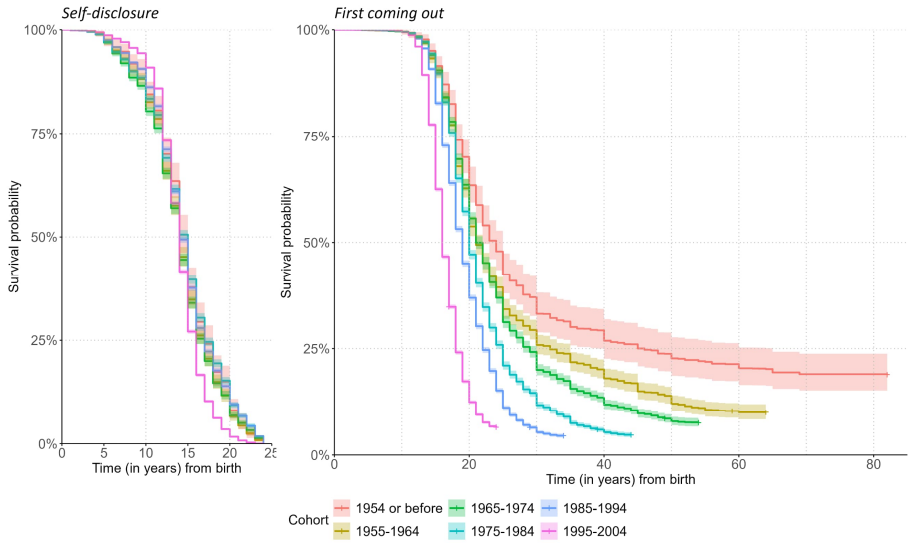
Table 1: Mean age at self-disclosure and at first coming out to others, and self-disclosure/coming-out age gap, by LGB sexual identity, with t-test (FRA, 2019)

	Age at self-disclosure	*Age at first coming out*	*Age gap (in years)*	*% of respondents who have come out*
Sexual identity	Mean (standard deviation)			
Gay men	13.91 (5.06)	20.04 (6.15)	6.22 (5.87)	95.62
Lesbian women	16.72 (6.66)	20.48 (6.81)	3.79 (5.39)	97.74
Bisexual men	16.85 (7.04)	21.74 (8.55)	5.49 (7.02)	77.18
Bisexual women	17.20 (6.84)	20.00 (7.41)	2.97 (5.03)	91.99
Total	**15.72 (6.37)**	**20.37 (7.00)**	**4.88 (5.94)**	**91.97**
T test	Gap in years (P-value)			
Gay men vs. all	–3.02 (p < 0.001)	-0.58 (p < 0.001)	2.31 (p < 0.001)	
Gay/Lesbian vs. bisexual	–2.20 (p < 0.001)	-0.51 (p < 0.001)	1.43 (p < 0.001)	
LGB men vs. LGB women	–2.16 (p < 0.001)	–0.25 (p < 0.001)	2.66 (p < 0.001)	

To investigate the cohort-related results we conducted survival analyses, restricting the sample to individuals who self-disclosed before age 25 to ensure reliability. The mean age at self-disclosure does not differ significantly between cohorts, typically occurring

(on average) when respondents are around 14 years old. However, the mean age at first disclosure to others drops significantly for younger cohorts (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Kaplan–Meier survival curves: Age at self-disclosure and first coming out by birth cohort among people who self-disclose their LGB identity before reaching 25 years of age (FRA, 2019)



Evidence indicates that regardless of a similar age at self-disclosure, younger people tend to come out earlier and at a higher rate than older LGB respondents. Thus, the gap between the age at self-disclosure and the age at coming out to others is much smaller among younger groups.

Table 2 shows a great heterogeneity across countries in terms of the three outcomes. For age at self-disclosure, countries with a mean age higher than the European average are predominantly from Nordic and Central Europe, including Germany, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, and Belgium, the sole exceptions being Portugal and Hungary. By contrast, countries with a lower mean age compared to the European average include the three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Eastern Europe and the Balkans (Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania), Southern Europe (Greece and Cyprus), the United Kingdom and Ireland. These clusters themselves mask a considerable internal heterogeneity.

Table 2: Mean age at self-disclosure and at first coming out, and self-disclosure/coming-out age gap by country of residence. Ranking sorted by ascending mean age at self-disclosure (FRA, 2019).

	Age at self-disclosure	*Age at first coming out*	*Age gap (in years)*	*% of respondents who have come out*
Country of residence	Mean (standard deviation)			
Lithuania	14.32 (4.40)	18.14 (5.30)	3.87 (5.10)	83.19
Croatia	14.51 (5.11)	19.24 (5.23)	4.86 (5.16)	90.58
Estonia	14.69 (4.35)	18.33 (5.28)	3.66 (4.31)	89.84
Cyprus	14.70 (5.18)	20.02 (5.81)	5.35 (5.80)	90.90
Slovenia	14.78 (4.49)	18.93 (4.94)	4.20 (4.63)	91.05
Latvia	14.84 (4.72)	18.83 (5.01)	4.15 (4.50)	89.32
Bulgaria	14.94 (4.28)	18.96 (5.35)	4.23 (4.88)	85.82
Serbia	14.94 (5.33)	20.31 (6.02)	5.62 (5.95)	89.54
United Kingdom	14.98 (6.52)	19.60 (7.66)	4.94 (6.41)	93.18
North Macedonia	15.12 (4.73)	19.56 (5.20)	4.60 (5.24)	84.55
Slovakia	15.15 (5.14)	19.25 (5.89)	4.26 (4.94)	91.06
Ireland	15.26 (6.12)	20.10 (7.10)	5.19 (6.04)	92.85
Greece	15.29 (6.04)	20.81 (6.73)	5.65 (6.33)	92.28
Romania	15.34 (5.46)	20.44 (7.03)	5.39 (6.62)	86.67
Malta	15.36 (6.09)	19.69 (6.65)	4.50 (5.82)	92.09
Finland	15.49 (6.60)	19.97 (6.78)	4.52 (5.42)	94.55
Austria	15.55 (6.42)	20.54 (7.03)	5.04 (5.85)	92.39
Czech Republic	15.64 (5.38)	19.40 (6.27)	3.95 (5.21)	89.80
Poland	15.65 (5.32)	19.76 (5.77)	4.23 (4.74)	90.91
Spain	15.73 (6.58)	20.33 (6.85)	4.79 (5.86)	94.36
Sweden	15.85 (7.04)	20.43 (7.36)	4.92 (6.16)	92.92
Italy	15.88 (6.93)	21.36 (7.39)	5.71 (6.61)	91.45
Germany	15.97 (6.39)	20.62 (7.08)	4.88 (5.85)	92.28
Portugal	16.17 (7.00)	21.14 (7.20)	5.22 (6.17)	91.40
Netherlands	16.19 (6.41)	20.17 (6.85)	4.09 (5.33)	94.70
France	16.21 (6.71)	20.81 (7.15)	4.91 (6.01)	92.12
Luxembourg	16.32 (6.11)	20.80 (7.03)	4.44 (5.53)	94.60
Denmark	16.49 (6.50)	20.63 (7.06)	4.30 (5.34)	94.12
Belgium	16.53 (7.06)	20.81 (7.23)	4.55 (5.98)	94.07
Hungary	16.62 (6.42)	20.58 (6.88)	4.13 (5.20)	89.89
Total (EU30)	*15.72 (6.37)*	*20.37 (7.00)*	*4.88 (5.94)*	*91.90*

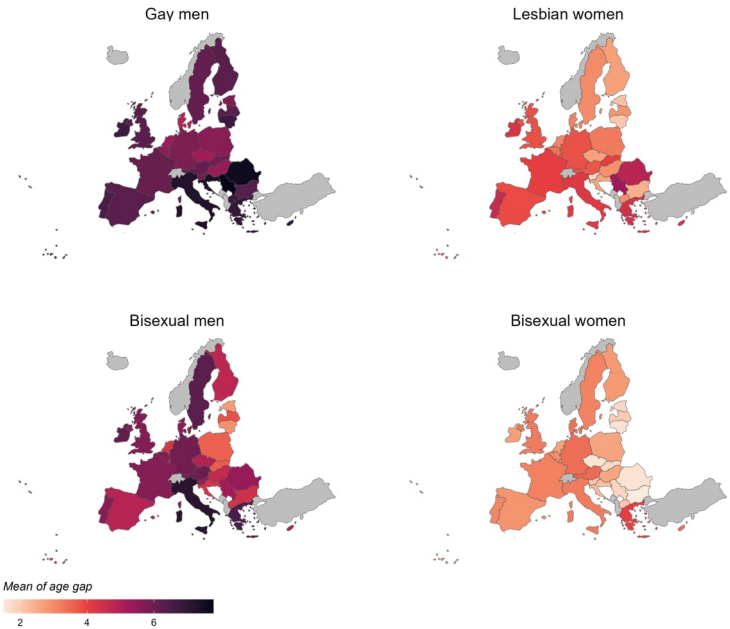
Note: Values in bold are statistically different from the aggregate mean of all European countries according to the t-test (p-value < 0.001).

Additional insights emerge when we relate these findings to the timing and extent of coming out across countries. For instance, in several Eastern European countries the average age at self-disclosure is below 15 years old. However, these same countries have

the lowest rates of individuals coming out to anyone (90% or less) overall. Conversely, some of the countries with the highest average age at first coming out – i.e., Italy, Portugal, and Greece – also exhibit long gaps (over 5 years) between self-disclosure and coming out. Denmark and the Netherlands, where the mean age at coming out is also among the highest, stand out as they show the highest proportions of individuals who have come out to others.

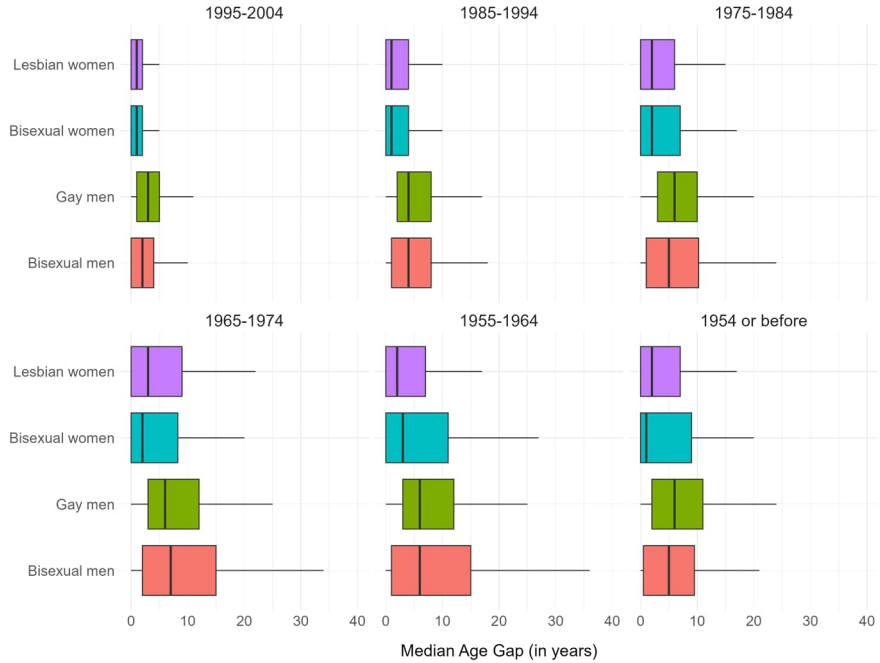
Comparing age gaps between countries accounting also for sexual identity (Figure 2), some of the largest gaps are observed in Italy and Romania for all identities except bisexual women. Yet Figure 2 clearly shows how age gap by sexual identity is larger among gay and bisexual men and smaller among lesbian and bisexual women (as shown in Table 1) across all countries, regardless of the singular mean age at self-disclosure and mean age at coming out by country. Thus, regardless of country variation and with very few exceptions, the distribution of the age gap is gendered.

Figure 2: Mean age gap (in years) between self-disclosure and first coming out by country and sexual identity (FRA, 2019)



A similar gendered pattern is observed when looking at the age gap by sexual identity and cohort in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Median age gap (in years) between age at self-disclosure and age at first coming out, by sexual identity and cohort (FRA, 2019)



Note: Not displaying outside values (± 1.5 times the interquartile range).

While the age gap between self-disclosure and first coming out is generally smaller among younger individuals for all LGB identities, longer age gaps are consistently observed among LGB men across all cohorts. More specifically, the median age gaps for LGB women are smaller than those for LGB men in (almost) all cohorts. This finding could imply that although LGB women have a higher age at self-disclosure than gay men across all cohorts, they come out more quickly once they acknowledge their sexual identity (as shown in Table 1). Figures 2 and 3 suggest that LGB men face more challenges in coming out compared to LGB women, a pattern that remains consistent across cohorts and countries.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Gay men in our sample acknowledge their sexual identity earlier than lesbian women, bisexual men, and bisexual women. Although there are no differences between cohorts in age at self-disclosure, the gap between age at self-disclosure and age at first coming out to others has narrowed across cohorts, as the age at first coming out has decreased significantly across cohorts. On the other hand, according to our data, age at self-disclosure varies considerably across Europe, being highest in the Nordic countries and lowest in the Eastern European countries. Based on these descriptive findings, some conclusions can be drawn.

First, given that younger people are significantly more likely to come out earlier and at a higher rate than older age groups, the evidence supports the idea that a period effect exists for age at first coming out. On the other hand, we did not find any evidence that the age at self-disclosure depends on the historical period, as it did not vary in different cohorts. Earlier coming out may indicate greater ease in navigating the process of sexual identity development (i.e., reduced social stigma) among younger cohorts (Dunlap 2016). Previous research suggests this is partly attributable to the advent of the internet and social media, which provide access to accurate information, role models, resources, and supportive communities (Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2012). Additionally, the first legal recognition of same-sex couples in the 1990s, along with shifting public perceptions and increasingly favourable attitudes toward LGBTQIA individuals over the last two decades (Abou-Chadi and Finnigan 2019), may have offered younger generations greater social support. These factors have likely facilitated coming out experiences and had a positive impact on mental health. Although coming out can increase perceptions of discrimination, being open about one's sexual identity has a net positive effect on mental health by providing access to social support and a sense of belonging within the LGBTQIA community (Hall, Dawes, and Plocek 2021; Suppes, Van Der Toorn, and Begeny 2021).

Second, while earlier mean age at coming out and smaller age gaps for all may suggest that LGB individuals face fewer challenges in disclosing to others, findings for gay and bisexual men suggest that a significant stigma likely persists for LGB men, particularly bisexual men. Gay and bisexual men report the longest gaps between self-disclosure and coming out.

Third, evidence related to country differences may be interpreted in the context of the stigma and social attitudes specific to each country. Thus, higher mean age at coming out and/or large age gaps between self-disclosure and first coming out in certain countries – for instance, Italy or Portugal – may suggest the presence of an accentuated stigma in these countries. Unexpectedly, we found the lowest age of self-disclosure and narrowest

age gaps in some Eastern European countries and some of the highest ages of self-disclosure in the Netherlands and Denmark.

A tentative explanation may be that positive social attitudes toward homosexuality – which are repeatedly found in Nordic countries (Dotti Sani and Quaranta 2020) – place less pressure on individuals to question their sexual identity, thus leading to higher age at self-disclosure, on average. Conversely, high homonegativity, often found in some Eastern and Southern European countries (Dotti Sani and Quaranta 2020) that also score poorly on the Rainbow Map Index (i.e., an index that monitors the legislative and policy environment of LGBTI people in Europe), may prompt earlier self-disclosure among LGB individuals due to the perceived dissonance between their identity and socially prescribed gender norms.

To fully comprehend the robustness of the evidence presented, further studies of sexual identity development and disclosure among LGB people living in Europe is required. However, this first evidence on the sexual identity development of LGB people living in Europe can inform future research, enhancing the interpretation of empirical findings concerning sexual orientation in the European context.

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