



# A qualitative examination of career adaptation of LGBT+ individuals

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Received: 24 June 2025 / Accepted: 29 December 2025  
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## Abstract

This study explores LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and other sexual and gender minority identities) individuals' career adaptation processes through the career construction model of career construction theory. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological design, data were collected from 15 participants via snowball sampling using a personal information form and semistructured interviews. Content analysis revealed 14 themes and 31 categories across four dimensions: adaptivity, adaptability (concern, control, curiosity, confidence), adapting responses, and adaptation results. Participants reported challenges in career decision-making and exploration. Some preferred working in socially accepting countries. Coming out influenced the effectiveness of coping strategies in job search and the workplace.

**Keywords** LGBT+ individuals · Career construction theory · Career adaptation model

## Résumé

Cette étude examine les processus d'adaptation professionnelle des personnes LGBT+ à travers le modèle de construction de carrière issu de la théorie de la construction de carrière. Adoptant une approche qualitative et phénoménologique, les données ont été recueillies auprès de 15 participant-e-s par échantillonnage en boule de neige, à l'aide d'un formulaire d'informations personnelles et d'entretiens semi-structurés. L'analyse de contenu a mis en évidence 14 thèmes et 31 catégories répartis selon quatre dimensions : l'adaptativité, l'adaptabilité (préoccupation, contrôle, curiosité, confiance), les réponses d'adaptation et les résultats de l'adaptation. Les participant-e-s ont rapporté des difficultés dans la prise de décision et l'exploration professionnelles. Certain-e-s ont exprimé une préférence pour travailler dans des pays socialement plus

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ouverts. Le coming out a influencé l'efficacité des stratégies d'adaptation lors de la recherche d'emploi et sur le lieu de travail.

### Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie untersucht die Prozesse der beruflichen Anpassung von LGBTQ+-Personen anhand des Karrierekonstruktionsmodells der Career Construction Theory. Im Rahmen eines qualitativen, phänomenologischen Forschungsdesigns wurden die Daten von 15 Teilnehmenden mittels Schneeball-Sampling erhoben; hierfür kamen ein persönlicher Informationsbogen sowie halbstrukturierte Interviews zum Einsatz. Die Inhaltsanalyse identifizierte 14 Themen und 31 Kategorien in vier Dimensionen: adaptivität, Anpassungsfähigkeit (Sorgfalt, Kontrolle, Neugier, Selbstvertrauen), Anpassungsreaktionen und Anpassungsergebnisse. Die Teilnehmenden berichteten von Herausforderungen bei der beruflichen Entscheidungsfindung und Exploration. Einige bevorzugten eine Tätigkeit in gesellschaftlich akzeptierenden Ländern. Das Coming-out beeinflusste die Wirksamkeit von Bewältigungsstrategien bei der Stellensuche und am Arbeitsplatz.

### Resumen

Este estudio explora los procesos de adaptación profesional de personas LGBTQ+ a través del modelo de construcción de carrera de la Teoría de Construcción de Carrera. Empleando un diseño cualitativo y fenomenológico, se recopilaban datos de 15 participantes mediante muestreo en cadena, utilizando un Formulario de Información Personal y Entrevistas Semiestructuradas. El análisis de contenido reveló 14 temas y 31 categorías distribuidos en cuatro dimensiones: adaptabilidad, capacidad de adaptación (preocupación, control, curiosidad, confianza), respuestas de adaptación y resultados de la adaptación. Los participantes informaron dificultades en la toma de decisiones y la exploración profesional. Algunos prefirieron trabajar en países socialmente inclusivos. El hecho de revelar su orientación influyó en la eficacia de las estrategias de afrontamiento durante la búsqueda de empleo y en el entorno laboral.

While LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and other sexual and gender minority identities) individuals, who are seen as disadvantaged owing to their sexual orientation, are recognized worldwide (Meydan, 2020), demographic information is not recorded in Türkiye (we have used the abbreviation LGBTQ+ throughout the article; a different abbreviation is specific to the referenced study). In Türkiye, LGBTQ individuals may face various rights violations and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, and these attitudes and practices are widely observed in social life and public institutions (Yılmaz & Demirbaş, 2015). Since the antidiscrimination laws in the Constitution do not include expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation, the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals cannot be effectively protected (Özgünlü, 2019).

While an increasing number of countries worldwide have adopted employment policies against LGBTQ discrimination, such protections do not yet exist in Türkiye (McFadden, 2015). Cultural dynamics in Türkiye limit the visibility of lesbian, gay,

bisexual (LGB) individuals, and research on their experiences is scarce (Kemer et al., 2017). The previous findings have shown that only 3.1% of LGBTI+ employees in Türkiye came out with their sexual orientation during the recruitment process for government-related positions (Kaos GL, 2023a, 2023b). In contrast, this rate was 11.2% in the private sector. In general, organizations lack procedures and practices to protect LGBTI+ employees from discrimination and meet their needs (Kaos GL, 2021a, 2021b).

Understanding how individuals adapt their career development to the social context is crucial to understanding LGB career development. Given societal responses to LGB individuals, it becomes imperative to examine how societal dynamics influence and shape their career experiences (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). Career construction theory (CCT), which focuses on individual and contextual factors in career development, examines how one's aspirations and society's expectations interact with one's ability to adapt to one's environment (Savickas, 2005). Therefore, this study adopted the theoretical lens of CCT. The CCT proposes that people adapt to their environment by integrating personal needs with social factors (Savickas, 2002, 2005).

A significant indicator of career development, career adaptation has four stages: adaptivity (having optimism and proactive personality traits), adaptability (psychological resources that drive change), adapting responses (implementing relevant behaviors when change is needed), and adaptation results (interacting into life roles) (Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In terms of career adaptation stages, existing research indicates that their genuine career interests may be constrained (Pope et al., 2004), and their insecurity in discussing their crucial sexual orientation concerns openly could hinder career exploration (Collins & Callahan, 2012), manifesting as limited career exploration and stagnant curiosity. The restriction may result from perceived obstacles and unfavorable environmental pressures (Collins & Callahan, 2012). LGBTI individuals impacted by workplace discrimination have difficulty in preparing for their careers (Baker & Lucas, 2017; Charles & Arndt, 2013), as well as reconciling their identities to their potential career choices (adapting responses) (Chung et al., 2015). As a result of these identity- and career-related challenges, individuals may conform to established occupational stereotypes (Pope et al., 2004), ultimately resulting in poor job satisfaction (i.e., adaptation results). Hence, it is essential to identify the strengths, needs, and challenges associated with the components of this career adaptation process to understand its hidden elements and to support the career development of these individuals. Therefore, this study aims to answer the question: "How do LGBT+ individuals experience career adaptation processes?"

Although sexual orientation is only one aspect of social identity, examining how it affects career development is emphasized (Hoffshire, 2017). Sexual identity development is a developmental process involving specific experiences and stages. In this process, homosexual individuals experience confusion or sensitivity about their identity, compare their identity with others, accept their identity, develop positive attitudes toward their identity, feel the desire to explain their identity to both homosexual and heterosexual individuals, increase their social interactions, and integrate their identity to create a new lifestyle (Cass, 1984; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1989).

The situation is slightly different for trans individuals. Experiences of identity management, discrimination, and harassment in the workplace are evident for transgender individuals but are mainly shaped around gender identity and gender expression (Brewster et al., 2012). For example, an individual transitioning from male to female may lose male privilege and find themselves in a less egalitarian position with reduced power and status. They may desire a job in female gender roles and act accordingly (Brown et al., 2012). Discrimination is different for a transgender person than for an LGB individual because sexual orientation can be hidden by nature compared with gender identity and gender expression (Sowden et al., 2016).

As a result of their sexual orientation and the challenges of growing up in heterosexual societies, these individuals are under numerous stressors (Jang et al., 2021). As they progress along their career paths, these challenges persist and are exacerbated by professional development stressors (Beck et al., 2016). LGBT+ individuals act within a complex interplay of personal, sexual, social, and interpersonal factors when structuring and sustaining their careers (Gedro, 2009). While studies on LGB career development in Türkiye are relatively new, those that focus exclusively on bisexual and transsexual individuals are especially limited. This research aimed to examine the experiences of not only lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual individuals in Türkiye but also transgender and transsexual individuals who are almost invisible in the world of work. The study examined the career adaptability processes of LGBT+ individuals with a phenomenological approach using CCT (Savickas, 2005), including career transitions, career decisions, career goals and plans, career barriers, resources, and outcomes. In addition, it contributes to the literature as the first Turkish study explaining the career adaptability of LGBT+ individuals.

## Theory informing the study

The Career Construction Theory (CCT) by Savickas (2005) is a crucial tool that provides theoretical and conceptual frameworks for comprehending the career development of LGBT individuals. Savickas (2002, 2005) focuses on how individuals shape their careers by adapting to social contexts, which is particularly significant in understanding the career development processes of LGBT individuals. This process also influences the career behaviors of individuals influenced by interpersonal processes while structuring their lives (Maree, 2014). For LGBT+ career development, it is essential to delve into how LGBT+ individuals explore career options, make career decisions, and cope with workplace challenges. At this juncture, CCT's Career Adaptation Model offers an overview of how individuals structure and manage their careers (Savickas, 2013). The adaptation process unfolds in a sequence that includes adaptivity, career adaptability, adapting responses, and finally, adaptation results (Hirschi et al., 2015; Johnston, 2018; Savickas, 2005).

Firstly, adaptivity is the personality trait of flexibility and willingness to change (Savickas, 2013). Adaptivity is associated with a proactive personality, cognitive flexibility, future orientation, hope, and optimism (Rudolph et al., 2017). Secondly, career adaptability refers to psychosocial resources that can help individuals manage this process in the face of uncertainty, change, or traumatic situations (Savickas,

2005). Career adaptability has four subdimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (4Cs). Concern refers to the individual's interest in their career and emphasizes the importance of getting prepared for the future. Career control refers to individuals feeling responsible for shaping their careers. Curiosity involves self-discovery and learning about career opportunities. Confidence represents individuals' sense of competence against career obstacles. Thirdly, adaptation responses are behaviors used to adapt to change, such as self-efficacy, career exploration, and career planning (Hirschi et al., 2015; Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2013). Finally, adaptation results describe the consequences of adaptation responses, such as including career commitment, career decidedness, employability, job satisfaction, income, job stress, and turnover intention (Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2013). Considering that career development and sexual identity develop simultaneously and considering the marginalizing and discriminatory attitudes prevailing in society, it is essential to understand the career adaptation processes of LGBT+ individuals.

## Methods

The social constructivist perspective states that individuals try to understand the world in which they live and work. The subjective meanings individuals develop from their experiences are shaped by social contexts and cultural norms (Creswell, 2021). This qualitative research examines the career adaptation of LGBT+ university students working in Türkiye with a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological approaches focus on understanding the process by which individuals make sense of experience and how they transform experience into consciousness (Merriam, 2018) and exploring the experiences of individuals to examine a phenomenon (Creswell, 2021). It also considers the context and how individuals create meaning (Hennekam & Ladge, 2017).

## Participants

In total, 15 LGBT+ individuals participated in this study. The inclusion criteria for participants were being over 18 years of age, being aware of their sexual orientation and gender identity since the age of 15 years, living in Türkiye, and being a university student or employed. We used snowball sampling, a purposive sampling method, to reach participants. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 27 years. Eight participants were assigned female at birth, and seven were assigned male at birth. Among the participants, there were six gay men, two bisexual individuals (one woman), three lesbian women, three heterosexual trans men, and one asexual non-binary person. In the study, 11 participants were associate's, bachelor's, or graduate students, while 4 participants (P2, P5, P6, and P9) were employed. Overall, 4 participants had less than 1 year of work experience (P1, P3, P4, and P7), while 11

participants had between 1 and 10 years of work experience. In addition, 3 participants had no job changes, whereas 12 participants had two or more job experiences.

## Data collection

We developed the semistructured interview form to explain career adaptation holistically. The questions asked about participants' career plans (e.g., What kind of preparations do you make for your career/work life?), career decision-making processes (e.g., How do you make decisions about your career?), career options (e.g., What do you do to explore your career? What do you do to explore your career options?), difficulties/obstacles they face in the job search process depending on whether they have work experience or not, and difficulties/obstacles they face in work life (e.g., What do you do to overcome the difficulties/obstacles you face in work life?). We received expert opinions on the language, clarity, content, and ranking of the questions in the form from four academics working in state universities who have publications in the field of LGBT+ and career counseling. We used the personal information form to collect age, educational status, and working experience.

## Process

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of a state university (approval no. E-51944218-101.02.02-00001501976). Before the interviews, we obtained consent from the participants using a voluntary participation and informed consent form. The first author conducted the interviews online owing to the difficulty of reaching participants in different cities. In total, 12 participants participated in the interviews via WhatsApp, 2 via Skype, and 1 via telephone. We conducted a single session with each participant and a maximum of two sessions daily. Interviews lasted between 21 and 54 min. The reason for such a large spread of interview time was that participants with more work experience provided more detailed answers to the questions. We encrypted and archived the audio recordings and transcriptions of all interviews. We completed the data collection process between November 2021 and May 2022.

## Analysis

Owing to qualitative research's flexible and dynamic nature, the data analysis proceeded simultaneously with data collection (Given, 2016). After the data was obtained from 12 participants, no new codes were formed, but we ended the interviews with 15 people by conducting three more interviews. The first author conducted the first coding by including the temporary codes he created while transcribing the interviews. During the first coding cycle, we used structural and conceptual coding methods (Saldaña, 2009). We combined the recurring experiences in the participants' statements under the same codes. We proceeded from codes to categories and themes using the inductive method. After the themes emerged, we saw that

they matched the Career Adaptation Model and grouped codes under each dimension. The second researcher reviewed the coding made by the first researcher and made suggestions. We discussed combining some codes and changing some code names. The coding process continued until a consensus was reached between the researchers.

We tried to ensure credibility through in-depth data collection and expert review. We considered data saturation to terminate data collection. Our research was evaluated by experts from the design stage to the development of data collection tools and at the end of the study. In reporting the study, we considered the principles outlined in the scientific article reporting standards for qualitative research (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). The fact that heteronormative societies ignore the needs of LGBT+ individuals and discriminate against them in different ways influenced the researchers' decision to work with them. The first researcher participated in various training sessions throughout the research. She read the resources shared with her by the Kaos GL Association and attended webinar meetings. She completed the LGBTI+ Rights Trainer training organized by Kaos GL for the first time in Türkiye. During team meetings held throughout data collection and analysis, researchers discussed participants' emerging needs—such as referring those requiring support to professional services—as well as their emotional responses to repeatedly listening to traumatic narratives. Techniques such as expert review, triangulation, and controlling researcher activities are recommended to ensure dependability in qualitative research (Merriam, 2018). In this study, we followed a structured flowchart, and the second researcher meticulously reviewed the whole process. We avoided leading questions in the interviews. We endeavored to present the findings of the research transparently and objectively.

## Findings

The data analysis resulted in 985 codings under four dimensions: adaptivity, career adaptability, adapting responses, and adaptability results, with 14 themes, 31 categories, and 99 codes (Table 1).

### Findings on adaptivity

In the adaptivity dimension, proactive and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills emerged as key themes. The participants demonstrated a proactive approach, showing initiative and commitment to their career goals. They were willing to seize opportunities, evaluate them critically, and engage in continuous learning. Moreover, they actively built social networks. For instance, participant (P)2 shared, "I established connections with a variety of individuals and received referrals that advanced my career after they were satisfied with my performance." P2 aimed to enhance accessibility and visibility through digital platforms such as websites and Instagram. A participant in journalism, P3, acquired specific software skills owing

**Table 1** Results of data analysis: dimension, subdimension, theme, category

Dimension	Subdimension	Theme	Category
Adaptivity	-	-	Proactive skills Social-emotional learning skills
Career adaptability	Concern	Future orientation	Close targets Distant targets
	Control	Career decision process	Personal factors Professional factors Societal factors Social support
		Career decision-making style	Rational decision-making Career indecision
	Curiosity	Career exploration	Strategies to explore career options Career options
		Self-exploration	Professional needs Personal needs Career values
	Confidence	Barriers faced in career development	Individual barriers Educational and professional barriers Environmental and contextual barriers
		Barriers encountered in job search	Barriers related to sexual identity and sexual orientation Work-life barriers Heteronormative challenges
		Coping with job search difficulties	Strategies to cope with challenges encountered during job search
		Barriers encountered at work	Psychosocial barriers Job-specific challenges Mobbing experiences
		Coping with work-life difficulties	Strategies to cope with challenges encountered in work-life

**Table 1** (continued)

Dimension	Subdimension	Theme	Category
Adapting responses	-	Career planning and preparation behaviors	Educational plans and preparations
			Professional plans and preparations
			Preparations related to the transition
Adaptation results	-	Career exploration behaviors	Procrastination/lack of preparation
		Positive outcomes in working life	Job search behaviors
		Negative outcomes in working life	-
			-

to an insatiable appetite for information. These findings underscore the participants' proactive behaviors in preparing to initiate actions toward their career goals by embracing ongoing learning and networking. These proactive behaviors can also be a coping skill (Mara et al., 2021).

Participants emphasized SEL skills, including effective communication, collaborative teamwork, and empathy for others' needs. One participant noted, "I discovered my ability to thrive in collaborative settings" (P5). One participant (P10) noted, "I learned effective communication and navigating diverse personalities." In addition to volunteering and providing support, participants demonstrated a keen awareness of marginalized groups' needs. One participant (P8) mentioned their work with migrants and asylum seekers that involved psychoeducation and psychosocial support. By enhancing adaptivity in the career adaptation process, these competencies play a crucial role in managing relationships at work. Participation in teamwork, communication skills, and sensitivity to the needs of others align with the desire of LGB-Q employees to work in an environment where they can support each other, contribute to society, and feel liberated (Ulaş-Kılıç et al., 2019).

## Findings on career adaptability

### Concern

The theme of future orientation emerged prominently in the "concern" subdimension, with two categories: close targets and distant targets. In the "close targets" category, some participants expressed their immediate goals, such as exam preparation: "I am studying for ALES [a graduate education entrance exam], I started an English course, and I am working extra hard to improve myself" (P7). As for others, they wanted to complete their education: "First of all, I intend to earn my master's degree this semester, and then I intend to complete my thesis and submit it next semester" (P1). Participants in the "distant targets" category expressed their desire to work abroad or switch careers: "I would like to improve my English further and continue this department abroad" (P4). Another participant envisioned a career in e-commerce upon graduation: "When I graduate in the future, of course, I think about my career in white-collar jobs, and I think I will deal with e-commerce" (P14). Additionally, one participant anticipated becoming a research assistant while pursuing a PhD in 5 years: "In 5 years, I will probably be a research assistant while my PhD is ongoing" (P7). These narratives emphasize the persistent determination to pursue career goals, driving individuals to prepare and plan strategically for their realization (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

### Control

Two themes emerged in the "control" subdimension of career adaptability: career decision process and career decision-making style. Three notable categories emerged in the career decision process. First, participants' career decisions were influenced by personal factors. The importance of professional satisfaction and

aligning choices with interests was emphasized. For example, P8 stated: “I thought I could explore areas where I could express myself more comfortably, especially within the scope of social psychology or preventive mental health studies.” A second factor is professional factors. These factors comprised employment opportunities, employer attitudes, and job advantages and disadvantages.

Employability and career prospects were essential considerations for some participants. For example, P4 shared, “As you know, since education in Türkiye is difficult, you cannot find a good job in every profession you study. I chose this department, as the opportunities are numerous.” Additionally, they weighed the pros and cons of working in different sectors, recognizing the potential challenges. P8, for instance, remarked, “The private sector seems more space-opening to me than being employed by the state. Of course, there may be certain difficulties, such as long working hours.”

Furthermore, participants considered societal factors, including economic and political dynamics and gender considerations. Several participants expressed that different circumstances might have led to different career choices owing to economic and political conditions in Türkiye. Gender roles affect some participants’ decisions, especially when societal expectations dictate their career paths. P1 noted, “If I didn’t live in Türkiye now, I might have had more favorable alternatives.” According to P4, “My field of study is drawing. We can be technicians, but drawing is more suitable for women.” Some cultures emphasize that gender determines career paths (Lett, 2022).

Importantly, social support influenced participants’ decisions. Parents, friends, and teachers encouraged and guided some students, underscoring the crucial role of a supportive network in career decision-making. P3, for example, mentioned, “I received much support when I chose this department. Especially my sister, my twin sister, my friends, my cousins, my family, and my relatives.” Other participants had to make decisions independently, as illustrated by P10: “I consulted people around me and my professors, but they didn’t offer me much advice.” The categories highlighted the multifaceted nature of participants’ career decision-making.

Career decision-making style consists of two categories: rational and indecision. A rational decision-making process involves setting goals, priorities, and accountability. Assessing career options, weighing pros and cons, and planning strategically, P3 stated, “I think carefully about the options I have in my mind about my career, such as whether they are well-founded, whether they have an A-B-C plan, or whether there are other options that make more sense.” Another participant outlined their future goals, emphasizing the importance of gaining experience before setting up their own architectural office (P2). A vital component of this process was evaluating potential outcomes and determining necessary steps, as stated by P3: “You have made this decision, you want to do this, what results will you achieve?”

In contrast, career indecision reflected an inability to control decision-making, leading to postponement and spontaneity. Many participants delayed choosing a university department. Despite uncertainty about the future, one participant accepted the unfolded path (P1). University entrance exam scores often influenced university department selection, as evidenced by a participant who chose a department not initially considered (P9).

In accepting one's sexual identity (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1989), various stress factors arise. In Hetherington's (1991) view, stress factors can disrupt other development processes if an individual has difficulty integrating their sexual identity with self-concept. In this situation, the time and energy expected to devote to career development may be diverted toward sexual identity development, resulting in career advancement difficulties. As a result of the struggle between sexual identity and career identity, an individual may experience greater career indecision owing to the need to allocate energy to internal resources to cope with marginalization (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). The relationship between this hypothesis and career indecision in LGB individuals needs to be further clarified, particularly in terms of which aspects of career development may be neglected owing to the struggle between sexual identity and career identity. At the point of expanding the bottleneck, it is essential to examine the career exploration behaviors of LGBT+ individuals.

## Curiosity

The "curiosity" subdimension, which included career and self-exploration themes, revealed a variety of strategies used by the participants to explore career options. These strategies included inquiry, observation, and networking. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube were actively used for this purpose, as P8 noted: "I try to communicate with people in my field on social media or follow their posts and studies." Some participants, such as P12, followed professionals and organizations relevant to their field on LinkedIn and sought internships or volunteer work. P2 shared, "I explore my options, as well as get information from my professors who have worked in this industry." Those with past work experiences or internships recognized the value of trying different roles, gaining a realistic understanding of their abilities and interests (P9 and P14). Other participants, such as P15, felt limited in opportunities and did not actively explore their options.

The theme of self-exploration encompassed professional and personal needs. Participants emphasized a safe and supportive work environment and ongoing vocational development as professional needs. They want a workplace where they can express themselves freely without judgment (P1). Some participants mentioned the need for additional training and education (e.g., P8). Socialization and economic independence were the most prominent personal needs. Social connections, including romantic relationships and community involvement, were sought (P10). Financial stability was a common concern (P1, P5, P7, P8, P10, and others). Career values, another category in self-exploration, included promotion, financial satisfaction, belonging, independence, competence, and fixed hours. These findings illustrate that participant career considerations encompass personal and professional needs and values. Compared with heterosexual peers' career values, LGBT individuals expect lower salaries and tend to value altruistic careers (Ng et al., 2012). However, in contrast to these findings, participants in this study frequently emphasize career values such as promotion, financial satisfaction, and belonging. Participants' direct experiences and preferences gained from work backgrounds could explain the divergence

in their prioritized career values. The decision not to come out at work could also influence it.

## Confidence

Five themes were included in the “confidence” subdimension: barriers LGBT+ individuals face in career development, barriers encountered in job search, coping with job search difficulties, barriers encountered at work, and coping with work–life difficulties. Firstly, the barriers in their career development encompassed individual (e.g., low self-efficacy, lack of motivation, health problems), educational and professional (e.g., insufficient professional qualifications and unstable education), environmental and contextual (e.g., family demands and expectations, pandemic, insufficient psychosocial support, financial barriers, and city change/moving), and those related to sexual identity and sexual orientation (e.g., barriers perceived regarding their LGBT+ identity). Individual barriers included doubts about their self-efficacy in tasks outside of traditional gender roles and health problems, such as anxiety and depression. For instance, P4 noted, “I can only do limited things because my department is for males. I can do things like drawing projects, but I cannot hold something and assemble it so that I might have some difficulties.”

Participants expressed feelings of inadequacy and low competence regarding educational and professional barriers. A participant (P8) noted, “I felt very inadequate when I started my profession. I needed more competence.” As for environmental and contextual barriers, one participant mentioned, “I wanted to receive sexual therapy training, even to work with LGBT+ individuals afterward. Due to family and financial constraints, I gave up” (P1). The pandemic also caused family involvement in career decisions to rise. Financial limitations were a primary obstacle for almost all participants, forcing them to work harder to make ends meet (e.g., P6, P9, and P14).

The last category encompassed obstacles perceived due to their LGBT+ identity and sexual orientation: “I have problems with my family and relatives because of my sexual identity” (P5). They also expressed concerns about potential future obstacles: “I think that my sexual orientation will hinder me somewhere” (P7). Gender assumptions based on appearance and invasive questions were common difficulties. Transgender individuals face additional challenges in medical procedures and workplace disclosure. For instance, one participant had to conceal the real reason for surgery (P14). For many participants, balancing the desire to be open about their identity with the fear of discrimination posed a dilemma.

In the confidence subdimension, the second theme was barriers encountered during the job search process, encompassing work–life barriers, and heteronormative challenges. The scarcity of job opportunities, employers’ unrealistic expectations, and job/internship availability relative to graduates were work–life barriers. Participants expressed the challenge of finding jobs in a competitive market: “The first obstacle I face in the job search is the lack of jobs... this is a serious obstacle” (P9). Unrealistic employer expectations contributed to job search difficulties: “They usually want experienced people, but how can I be experienced before I have my first experience?” (P2). Heteronormative barriers involved job advertisements specifying gender or adhering to binary gender roles: “Such designations or job descriptions

are repellent...when it was written for women, I could not click on the application button” (P8). Participants faced gender-specific challenges in job searching.

The third theme revolved around strategies to cope with job search challenges. Participants explored alternative opportunities, rehearsed for interviews, altered their appearance, and sought social support to overcome these difficulties. To overcome obstacles, some participants explored diverse job options: “I was looking at different lines of work or different positions that I could work in...strengthening my connections around me a little more” (P8). To identify potential opportunities, they sought advice from peers who had completed internships. Interview rehearsals helped them cope: “I talked to myself in the mirror before the job interview...that interview went well” (P1). Visualizing their responses and imagining scenarios boosted their confidence. To overcome heteronormative barriers, some participants altered their appearance: “I changed myself to deal with it; I adopted a style for myself...Since I changed it, I have not faced such problems” (P11).

A fourth theme of the confidence subdimension identified barriers at work, including psychosocial barriers, job-specific challenges, and mobbing experiences. The psychosocial barriers involved criticism and labeling for not conforming to traditional gender roles, leading to anxiety in service-oriented roles, as one participant shared. “Because I have always been short-haired, I have always been told I am more like a man, which was the most negative thing for me” (P6). Communication problems with employers, coworkers, or customers further exacerbated these issues, with a participant expressing, “Bosses and employers generally had unbalanced attitudes towards their employees, causing uncertainty and fear” (P1). Work-specific barriers included working without insurance, short-term contracts, inadequate wages, long and inconsistent hours, and unrelated tasks. One transgender individual mentioned, “My gender identity can sometimes be a problem, which is why I did not get insurance. My identity card has not changed yet as I’m transitioning” (P14). There were also demanding jobs, such as sales consultants managing cash registers and providing security, even though it was not part of the job description (e.g., P11). Employees who were exposed to workplace mobbing suffered psychologically and physically owing to intimidation. All participants experienced various difficulties, including mistreatment, intrusive behavior, physical violence, rudeness, threats of job termination, and humiliation. Even some participants reported sexual harassment by their employers (P1, P9, and P10). Individuals sometimes considered leaving jobs because of these experiences.

The fifth theme, “coping with difficulties in work–life,” featured participants employing various strategies. Some participants use communication skills to foster healthy interactions with colleagues and clients. The assigned gender role is another coping strategy (P1 and P7) to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity owing to heteronormative barriers. Establishing boundaries is another effective strategy against mobbing, harassment, and violence. They aim to manage interactions (P5), whether verbal or nonverbal. The participants also mentioned ignoring inappropriate behavior and responding assertively (P10).

Quitting or changing employment was another commonly used strategy when violence persisted.

### **Findings on adapting responses**

The first theme of the adapting responses dimension is career planning and preparation behaviors (such as educational and professional plans and transition). Participants' plans and preparations involved enhancing their education and skills. One participant expressed a desire to improve their English language proficiency (P4). Others planned to pursue additional training, such as diction or announcer training, to advance (P3). Others prepared for various exams (P5). Professional preparations included internships, trials, training, and entrepreneurial endeavors. Participants attended vocational training and conducted vocational trials to improve their competencies (e.g., P6 and P7). In addition, they evaluated job advertisements and applied for internships to gain practical experience within Türkiye and abroad (P14). A few participants planned to start their own businesses. One participant intended to create a queer-friendly tattoo studio with a friend (P9). In addition to their career preparations, some participants described specific gender transition preparations (P3 and P5). The theme also included a category involving procrastination or lack of preparation. Procrastination was caused by financial constraints (P1), a belief that their education was sufficient (P5 and P10), seeking work experience rather than additional preparation (P13), and no specific plans at all (P15).

The second theme of the adapting responses dimension, career exploration behaviors, particularly job search behaviors, highlighted the proactive nature of participants. In their job search, participants employed a variety of methods. Some preferred to find employment independently, while others relied on references. One participant, for instance, credited a friend for informing them of a job opening and assisting them in securing a job (P7). Additionally, some participants were actively engaged in using online platforms to find jobs (e.g., P2). While participants discussed various career and academic plans, their proactive job search efforts were a key focus. LGBT+ individuals face discrimination in job searching and work life, so choosing to apply through references or evaluate jobs might create a safer work environment. According to a study on LGBTI+ employment in Türkiye, most LGBTI+ employees obtain jobs through acquaintances, social media, and career sites, with limited utilization of the Turkish Employment Agency and private employment channels (Kaos GL, 2016a).

### **Findings on adaptation results**

Adaptation results included both positive and negative outcomes in working life. In the workplace, positive outcomes included career and organizational commitment, financial satisfaction, a sense of belonging, and connections within the LGBT+ community. P12 highlighted the benefits of working within an LGBT+ inclusive environment. Others expressed satisfaction in earning income, even if it was not

related to their profession (P1). After coming out at work, some participants found belonging and acceptance among colleagues (P11), fostering comfort and support. The study also found more negative outcomes in the workplace, such as stress related to revealing one's sexual orientation and identity. They shared job stress related to their identities being revealed or questioned at work (e.g., P10). Stress was increased by dilemmas about appearance and conforming to gender expectations (P2). Career-related stress is also caused by workplace harassment and lack of insurance. When people do not come out of their identities at work, there is internal conflict, even if they have positive work experiences. Thus, positive outcomes were mainly related to diversity-friendly workplaces, while adverse outcomes were due to discrimination, highlighting the urgent need to address workplace discrimination.

## Discussion

Within the Career Adaptation Model framework, this study examined the experiences of LGBT+ individuals during the career adaptation process. We found that proactive behaviors and SEL skills were prominent in the adaptivity dimension. Rather than personality traits related to proactivity, this study highlighted openness to learning and social networking traits, which can be considered a result of these traits. In particular, these qualities may prepare LGBT+ individuals for the workplace and increase their readiness against the challenges they face. Examples of proactive behaviors, such as involvement in LGBT organizations or unions, being a role model for others, and using social media to connect with LGBT communities can be appropriate coping strategies (Mara et al., 2021; Mizock & Mueser, 2014). The proactive skills of LGBT+ individuals have yet to be specifically studied. However, research on different samples (Jiang, 2017; Öncel, 2014; Tolentino et al., 2014) suggests that proactive skills are related to adaptivity, career adaptability, and its subdimensions. Proactive individuals can take active action in career transitions by focusing on improving existing opportunities.

A connection to the LGBTQA+ community is crucial for individuals who experience exclusion or disadvantage based on their sexual orientation (Jang et al., 2021). Hence, these skills could help participants actively engage with the community and respond to the cultural context. In Türkiye, business culture is predominantly collective or group-oriented (Uzkurt et al., 2013), and skills such as communication and building relationships could be critical. Hence, as revealed in the findings, these skills are essential for adaptively being ready for the world of work and obtaining positive career outcomes (Rudolph et al., 2017).

On the basis of the Career Adaptation Model, the current results highlighted participants' adaptability resources within the 4Cs of career adaptability. Results in the concern subdimension highlighted the participants' future orientation, including close and distant targets. Preparing for exams and completing the educational level are steps toward achieving distant targets. Those who wish to continue working in Türkiye said that coming out would not help them advance. The fact that most participants want to work abroad at some point in their lives is similar to the desire of LGB-Q individuals to continue their careers abroad regardless

of their jobs and to work in environments where they can express themselves freely living in Türkiye (Ulaş-Kılıç et al., 2019). The heteronormative order of Turkish public institutions and organizations prevents LGBT+ people from coming out. They are ignored (Kara, 2022) and may be dismissed if they declare their identity (Durmaz et al., 2017). Because of barriers LGBT+ individuals face in employment, they would like to work abroad and run their businesses in a way that offers them a better life and a healthy career path.

The control subdimension includes career decision processes and themes related to decision-making style. The previous findings emphasized that LGBTI individuals might have challenges in career exploration; they might restrict their interests significantly owing to perceived obstacles and unfavorable environmental pressures (Collins & Callahan, 2012; Pope et al., 2004); however, in the current research, participants mentioned that they consider their interests while making career decisions. Lesbian and gay individuals may struggle to clarify their career options and choose among alternative situations owing to stressors related to their sexual identity development (Dunkle, 1996). A crucial aspect of career decision-making could be low career opportunities, considering the 19.2% youth unemployment rate in Türkiye (TurkStat, 2022).

A change in legal processes such as education, examinations, or employment policies can affect an individual's career choice (Ulaş-Kılıç, 2023). As the participants mentioned, being employable is a crisis for LGBTI young adults living in Türkiye, which may be influenced by the country's economic and political status. However, the participants perceived social support as supportive of their career choices. They might feel more comfortable and secure in friend circles where they are recognized (Kara, 2022).

Exploring career options and self-exploration are included in the curiosity subdimension. While some participants have internship experience, all have work experience, which may have helped them discover their career options more easily (Korkut-Owen, 2018). Participants emphasized professional and personal needs within the scope of self-exploration. In Türkiye, the number of public and private universities has increased, resulting in a graduate surge. This expansion has created challenges for graduates entering the job market (Demir, 2022). With high youth unemployment rates and limited employment opportunities in Türkiye (Taş et al., 2018), economic independence becomes a central concern for most participants. Meanwhile, Türkiye's lack of recognition for homosexual individuals and their exposure to stigmatization (Öner, 2015), alongside divisive policies that heighten safety concerns for LGBT+ individuals (Kaos GL, 2016a), underscore the crucial need for a secure and supportive work environment.

Confidence is the last subdimension of career adaptability. Similarly to the current findings, a study of LGBTI+ employees in Türkiye's private sector (Kaos GL, 2022a) found gender-biased role expectations in job postings. Heteronormative barriers, such as job advertisements aligned with binary gender definitions and gender-specific requirements, deter LGBT+ applicants. LGBT workers reported harsh working conditions, including a lack of social security (Kaos GL, 2016b), similar to the current findings. The forced closure strategy negatively affects the health and well-being of LGBT employees and prevents job

satisfaction. It also makes it difficult to assess the true extent and impact of homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination in the workplace (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011).

In Türkiye, LGBT+ employees who follow a forced closure strategy face the risks they fear when they cannot implement this strategy. Therefore, to minimize the risk of discrimination and harassment as much as possible, they may follow a forced closure strategy starting from the job search process (Kaos GL, 2023a, 2023b). It is noteworthy that discrimination, harassment, mobbing, and job termination of people who are homosexual can result in depression, stress-related illnesses, and even suicide (Öner, 2015). Coming out to a manager is particularly risky because of the manager's power over an employee (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). Some participants reported experiencing workplace mobbing, while others reported feeling anxious and threatened after coming out. Furthermore, the current results indicated that participants used coping strategies in job searches, including rehearsals, appearance adjustments, and seeking perceived social support. Despite social exclusion and a myriad of challenges, some participants persist in seeking opportunities.

As a result of the challenges they faced in their work–life experiences, such as violence, harassment, and mobbing, participants' coping strategies also emerged. Some of these strategies have been used in previous studies to cope with homophobia and transphobia. For example, strategies such as seeking psychosocial support, setting boundaries, confronting discrimination, and quitting work include discrimination management strategies in the Work Discrimination and Coping Strategies Model (Chung, 2001). As in Mizock and Mueser's (2014) study, using gender role stereotypes is a coping strategy for participants even though it is uncomfortable owing to its incompatibility with identity.

Moreover, the present findings revealed adaptive responses regarding adaptability and career compatibility. Some participants indicated that they would like to complete the transition as part of their career planning and preparation. However, transgender individuals may have difficulty focusing on career preparation owing to experiences such as minority stress and misgendering (Goldberg et al., 2021). In this study, participants who had deficiencies in career preparation emphasized that they needed social support in line with the literature (Kara, 2022).

Participants reported positive (e.g., organizational commitment, belonging, LGBT+ connections) and negative adaptation outcomes (e.g., career stress, negative affect) at work. It is noteworthy that participants tended to emphasize negative rather than positive experiences. Being part of a disadvantaged group may hinder job and career satisfaction (Yoder & Mattheis, 2015). Many studies (Alay & Can, 2019; Kaos GL, 2022b) have shown that homosexual individuals have lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment and that discrimination, similar to these results, negatively affects the job satisfaction and performance of LGBTI+ individuals in public institutions.

## Limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research

On the basis of the few proactive and SEL skills mentioned by participants, the findings suggest that participants' adaptability resources must be improved. LGBT+ individuals' social acceptance is limited in Türkiye (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association [ILGA], 2016), and this could impact their efforts to be ready for the changes by implying the need for practical interventions to strengthen their adaptivity resources such as hope, resilience, and proactive personality. Because adaptivity positively affects career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), and individuals who are ready to adapt have higher scores in the career adaptability dimension (Perera & McIlveen, 2017), these findings also imply the prominent needs of LGBT+ individuals in career adaptability, especially in career decision-making (control), career exploration (curiosity), and coping resources (career confidence). Along with the current findings, previous work (Allan et al., 2019; Ulaş-Kılıç et al., 2019) underscores the role of professionals in career counseling in enhancing rational decision-making skills and effective coping strategies with career barriers. Therefore, developing career adaptability will contribute to decision-making, exploring career options, and developing career confidence.

Career decisions can be challenging when employers' attitudes, employment opportunities, gender, and economic and political factors dominate. Future longitudinal research should examine how LGBT+ individuals make and explore career decisions. As LGBT+ individuals face many individual, educational, occupational, environmental, and contextual barriers, career confidence becomes a vital adaptation resource. As a result, their limited coping strategies infer a social justice necessity; however, in Türkiye, LGBT+ individuals need effective mechanisms to navigate societal constraints related to their sexual identity and orientation.

Many participants who shared their coming out stories were negatively affected by coming out. In some cases, coming out led to supportive reactions from coworkers, but in others, the opposite was true. LGBT+ individuals may come out at any stage of their career development and may seek professional support. Transgender and transsexual individuals reported that transition was part of their career development. It was important for some participants to include gender-confirming surgery in their career plans. Counselors working with trans identities must consider that gender-confirming surgery and transition can continue throughout a career but is not obligatory. Career counselors may need to develop comprehensive strategies encompassing the transition's various facets, including health, legal, familial, and other relevant areas.

This research provides valuable insights that can help improve the employment prospects for LGBT+ individuals. The issue might be worth considering for policymakers. Firstly, it is imperative to establish policies safeguarding employees' rights across both the public and private sectors, ensuring LGBT+ inclusivity. This approach allows individuals to perceive that their professional qualifications are more important than their sexual identity or orientation during the job application process. Hiding one's identity at work and constantly worrying about whether to be open can negatively impact job performance, especially in environments that are not inclusive or supportive. It is advisable to take measures

ensuring that job advertisements and employee rights are not based solely on binary gender norms. This study demonstrates that regardless of sexual identity, gender expression, or orientation, individuals can contribute effectively to various roles and vocations that benefit society. Consequently, ordinances could prevent LGBT+ individuals from being represented as marginalized subcultures. People who feel a sense of belonging to their communities and professions can work with similar feelings, thus revealing their creativity, skills, and talents more effectively.

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The data and the researcher's interpretation influence the findings, and they may not apply to cultures with different attitudes toward LGBT+ acceptance. The participants in this study were aged between 19 and 27 years, corresponding to the tolerance and acceptance stage in sexual identity development models (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). It is crucial for future research to include participants from different age groups, as coping strategies for job-related challenges vary by sexual identity stage. Moreover, the study primarily focused on student or employee identities, while individuals often hold multiple identities (Hennekam & Ladge, 2017). In Türkiye, for instance, the combined identity of "Turkish, Muslim, Sunni, male, and heterosexual" carries significant societal weight (Kornau et al., 2021, p. 4). Therefore, future research should not only consider sexual identity and sexual orientation but also collect data on ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sect to ensure a more diverse and representative understanding of the issues at hand.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK).

**Data availability** Raw data and materials are available upon request from the corresponding author for the purpose of replication or further investigation.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** No conflicts of interest exist, and the content of the manuscript is the sole responsibility of the authors.

**Ethical approval and consent to participate** The research conducted in this study adhered to the highest ethical standards, obtaining necessary approvals from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring informed consent from all participants, and maintaining strict confidentiality throughout the research process.

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