"On the edge of sustainable": LGBTQ+ researchers' experiences of harm, fear, and community

Rosie Ola-Marie ⓘ
University of Bristol, UK

Charlotte Jones
Swansea University, UK

Amy Ryall
Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, UK

Tig Slater
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Abstract

Those who research LGBTQ+ issues find themselves at the intersection of multiple pressures, including conservative research cultures, public backlash, and intensive workloads. This paper explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ researchers in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) through a qualitative focus group study. Four focus groups demonstrate that LGBTQ+ researchers experience specific barriers and challenges due to their research topic and the currently hostile political climate. We argue that the harm, fear, and (lack of) community that LGBTQ+ researchers experience can be interpreted through Ahmed's (2014) conceptualisation of stickiness, whereby queerness holds many contradictory meanings beyond its practice. This queer stickiness impacts LGBTQ+ researchers' careers, resulting in a challenging and stressful balance of duties and self-management in neoliberal HEIs. This article develops conceptualisations of stickiness, understandings of UK research culture and pressures, and indicates the challenges of working in commercialised neoliberal HEIs. We conclude with some suggestions on how

Corresponding author:
Rosie Ola-Marie, School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies, University of Bristol, 11 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TU, UK.
Email: rosie.nelson@bristol.ac.uk

universities could better support the researchers putting themselves at risk to benefit their research cultures.

Introduction

Those who research minoritised or politicised issues are likely familiar with the challenging reactions that such topics can draw. Where a topic is politically contentious, research can generate fervent discussion and disagreement which may translate into the public, governmental, or media sphere (e.g. Cassidy, 2025). In some cases, the reactions to research from public and media spaces can deteriorate into unfounded and offensive claims about the topic (Rodriquez et al., 2025) or personal attacks against the researcher (Vera-Gray, 2017; Yelin, and Clancy, 2020, 2024). These hostile reactions can have significant impacts on the researcher, who may find themselves struggling emotionally (Nelson, 2020), wanting to give up their research topic (Rodriquez et al., 2025), or having to develop a safety plan as a consequence of the reactions to their work (Vera-Gray, 2017).

Issues of visibility and researcher safety can be amplified by the pressure placed on researchers to have a public presence and strive towards research impact. In the United Kingdom, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has developed new models of research quality assessment that celebrate research impact beyond the academy as well as broad models of research dissemination (Murray, 2025; UKRI, 2025b). Researchers are encouraged to consider ways in which they might make their research more visible, including but not limited to social media, workshops, community events, policy engagement, and media appearances (UKRI, 2025a). In this context, LGBTQ+ researchers - those who research LGBTQ+ topics and may or may not be LGBTQ+ themselves - find themselves in the intersection of these issues, working on highly politicised topics whilst being pushed by the UK research culture to be as visible as is feasible.

This article explores the findings from a qualitative research project focusing on LGBTQ+ researchers' experiences of UK research culture. We argue that LGBTQ+ researchers experience significant barriers as a result of their subject focus. These issues range from material harm to amplified feelings of fear, to the need to foster peer community groups. We argue that to understand these experiences, LGBTQ+ researchers' accounts can be understood through the framework of 'stickiness' (Ahmed, 2014) whereby LGBTQ+ issues are made sticky through the glut of meanings, politicisations, anxieties, and panics placed onto discussions of LGBTQ+ lives in the public and political sphere. This stickiness extends into LGBTQ+ researchers' work and career and results in a challenging work context.

This article starts by problematising concepts of visibility which is often understood as positive. We develop debates on LGBTQ+ (in)visibilities through emphasising the complex political landscape LGBTQ+ scholars work within. We contribute to discussions

around Ahmed's concept of stickiness, deploying this term in a novel way to indicate how researchers' work functions to establish sticky, inescapable reputations, which in themselves smother opportunities and political interpretations of researchers' work. We conclude this article with some suggestions on how institutions and LGBTQ+ researchers might benefit from different support measures. It is our hope that in the face of a growing right-wing and authoritarian confrontation of LGBTQ+ lives (Butler, 2025), institutions might think carefully about how to protect staff and students from external and internal confrontations and act accordingly. Understanding ongoing issues of anti-intellectualism, anti-identitarianism and the duel impacts of these on researchers working in highly politicised fields is an essential.

Queer visibilities in and beyond the academy

In this section, we explore visibility and critique views that visibility is inherently positive for LGBTQ+ people. We explore visibility in the context of academics working in HEIs, before concluding that *stickiness* is a helpful concept to understand the findings of our research into LGBTQ+ researchers' experiences.

LGBTQ+ individuals have historically been rendered invisible and excluded from dominant cultural narratives, policy frameworks, and social institutions. As Brighenti (2007, p.329) argues, visibility is closely associated with recognition. That is, to be seen is often equated with the potential for inclusion and validation within the public sphere. Liinason (2019) describes this conceptualisation of queer visibility to be a Western-centric paradigm which generates a globalised ideal of being "out and proud," whereby visibility necessarily leads to empowerment or liberation. This ideal can obscure the diverse realities of queer lives across different cultural, political, and historical contexts, where visibility may not be desirable, safe, or even intelligible in the same ways (Acosta, 2011; Liinason, 2019).

Recent research has explored how queer invisibility in different global contexts is not inherently repressive or disempowering. Acosta's (2011) study of sexually non-conforming Latinas demonstrates how visibility may be navigated in ways that resist dominant Western narratives of disclosure and pride. In this context, invisibility is shown to be a strategic and sometimes empowering choice that provides space for fluid and flexible self-presentation, particularly within familial contexts. These findings highlight the importance of examining how visibility is pursued or resisted in context-specific ways, and how such strategies can reflect autonomy rather than marginalisation.

LGBTQ+ people can also become subject to 'super-visibility', whereby certain identities are disproportionately represented, often in moments of moral panic or political debate (Brighenti, 2007). This super-visibility is not emancipatory; rather it can lead to negative or distorted social representation (p.330). For trans people, this can take the form of what Serano (2007) terms "trans fascination": a cultural fixation on trans bodies and identities that objectifies and dehumanises rather than affirms. Trans research, as Slater (2023) notes, can therefore be subjected to intense media scrutiny and overwhelming public attention. The ability to manage one's social image "on one's own terms" becomes increasingly difficult under conditions of either excessive, distorted visibility, or of invisibility (Brighenti, 2007, p. 330).

Evidently, (in)visibility for LGBTQ+ people is a more nuanced experience than 'out and proud' messaging might suggest. This nuanced understanding of visibility resonates with the broader discourse on surveillance and control. As Foucault (1977) observed, visibility can also function as a technology of discipline. Foucault's assertion that 'visibility is a trap' underlines how awareness of being watched can shape conduct, even in the absence of direct coercion. This is particularly relevant for LGBTQ+ individuals whose visibility may expose them to risk, be it through institutional discrimination, public scrutiny, or violence (Yelin and Clancy, 2024).

Fundamentally, the relationship between power and visibility is not straightforward. Brighenti (2007, p.340) asserts that power does not reside exclusively in visibility or invisibility, nor is visibility inherently linked to moral good or political progress. Instead, visibility must be understood as a contested and contingent space, shaped by the interplay of recognition, control, and resistance. For LGBTQ+ communities, navigating visibility involves a continual negotiation between the desire for acknowledgement and the risks of exposure, revealing the deeply ambivalent nature of being seen.

Visibility is not only a personal and political issue for LGBTQ+ people in general, but also an issue which impacts LGBTQ+ researchers and academics. In the context of a moral panic around transgender people in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, some LGBTQ+ research has received significant backlash from the public sphere (Butler, 2025; Phipps, 2020). Research can also be subject to negative responses within academia as researchers may feel marginalised (Taylor et al., 2023) or have their work regarded as niche or inappropriate due to the emphases on sexuality (Jones, 2018). Schilt identifies how scholars may also face disciplinary resistance to their work, through resistance, ridicule and reduction (Schilt, 2018).

Following the introduction of the REF – a UK evaluation framework with significant funding implications - UK research culture encourages academics to use social media, engage with policy makers and the media, and deliver impact where feasible (Murray, 2025). Engagement and the resulting impact are often established as inherently good, although may require a little more thought and planning for researchers to achieve. However, these impact-oriented aspirations may generate issues for those working on subjects as marginalised or highly politicised as LGBTQ+ lives. In tracking the responses to a recruitment advert for LGBTQIA+ people on Facebook, Rodriguez et al. (2025) found that LGBTQ+ researchers' online visibility was met with dehumanisation and pathologisation, resulting in seriously negative impacts upon the researchers (e.g. stress, wanting to give up, sadness).

Evidently, (in)visibility in academic research culture, and the highly politicized nature of both LGBTQ+ identities and research, results in a glut of issues to navigate. We argue that *stickiness* is a useful concept to frame the issues in this area. The term 'sticky' initially arose from a focus group participant's description of their experiences, which prompted us to consider its wider resonance across the dataset. Ahmed (2014) introduces the concept of 'stickiness' as a way of understanding how emotions circulate and become attached to particular bodies, objects, and ideas. Stickiness is not a neutral or passive quality; rather, it is produced through historical relationships and cultural associations. As Ahmed explains, stickiness 'binds' elements together, but also allows these associations to be transferred,

moving across bodies, signs, and spaces in a chain of effects (p.91). Through this process, emotions are not simply internal experiences, but social and political forces that shape how certain bodies are read, interpreted, and responded to.

Stickiness explains how emotions, such as fear, disgust, or shame, can become stuck to particular groups. Over time, through repetition in media, discourse and institutional frameworks, these affective associations begin to feel natural or inherent. Bodies and identities come to carry these emotions with them, through their attachment to dominant cultural narratives. This means that stickiness also shapes what, or who, is recognised, feared, celebrated, or abjected. Ahmed (2014, p.100) writes that "adhesion involves not just sticking to a surface, but giving one's support and allegiance." This duality highlights the ambivalence of affective attachments: they can constrain and define, but they can also be resisted, subverted, or re-routed. Stickiness thus becomes a useful lens to examine how affect operates not only to uphold dominant structures, but also to enable refusals of them.

We propose that stickiness is useful for understanding how LGBTQ+ visibility and research functions in the mire of political and intellectual issues. When queer bodies are made super-visible, they risk becoming sites onto which negative emotions such as anger or disgust are projected, making them subjects of scrutiny, rejection, or violence. For LGBTQ+ researchers, the label 'queer' itself can become sticky: difficult to shake, hide, or detach from, once it has been made public. Building a public profile or receiving a negative backlash can initiate a chain of exposure that is not easily reversed. Fear, in this context, is not just an individual emotion but a communal affective condition that binds the community through constant sense of risk. This fear circulates through stories of abuse and threats, and becomes part of what it means to be seen.

This paper argues that the current dynamic and configuration of research cultures, institutional pressures, and hyper politicisation of LGBTQ+ issues has led to a culture in which researchers experience *stickiness* in their conduct of LGBTQ+ research. LGBTQ+ themes are a fraught topic of research, which lead to disproportionate risks and impacts for the researchers in this field due to the super-visibility of LGBTQ+ topics in the current UK political and social climate.

Methodology

This article is based on a three-phase qualitative study conducted in 2025 in the United Kingdom. The project explored how stakeholders in LGBTQ+ research negotiated research cultures, including the REF, public engagement, and impact. To explore this, we conducted a policy review of university documents to explore how universities protected or responded to negative research responses. The second phase involved focus groups with academics researching LGBTQ+ topics to hear their experiences working in this field. The final phase involved one-on-one semi-structured interviews with research support staff to gather their perspectives on research culture and LGBTQ+ researchers' experiences, particularly in relation to engagement, impact, and dissemination.

This article is reporting on the data which emerged from the second arm of the study involving four focus groups with 19 researchers. Focus groups were held on Microsoft Teams and lasted for 90 minutes, plus an optional 30 minutes of follow-on socialising.

Two facilitators led each of the focus groups. Transcription was conducted externally and checked by researchers. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was used to develop findings that spoke to the research aims and focus. This was conducted using the open-source software Taguette, which supports multiple users working on a single dataset. Two focus groups were developed for self-defined Early-Career Researchers (ECRs), although some ECR participants chose to participate in focus groups with mixed career levels. The focus group discussion centred on participants' experiences of research, impact and dissemination in relation to sexuality and gender-based topics.

In thinking beyond procedural ethics, we sought to create a feminist informed ethical approach that centred on an ethics of care and connection (Leavy and Harris, 2018; Ola-Marie, 2026). Participants were invited to unwind and socialise off-record after the discussion, and were provided with regular research updates. We adopted multiple co-production tools including a survey asking participants to review draft focus group questions, an optional online feedback session for participants to discuss our preliminary themes, and regular meetings with an advisory board.

The research team developed this research, in part, due to personal experiences and interests that suggested a need for insight into this topic. The research team variously identifies as non-binary, queer, bisexual, cisgender, and transgender, leading to many points of connection with the participants. The research team also works across research, teaching, and university impact support roles. These factors benefited the research due to the shared experiences, languages, and intellectual backgrounds that aided in facilitating the focus groups. To ensure coherency across the research, all research team members were involved at all stages to check, discuss, analyse, and comment on the data and findings (Fusch et al., 2018). This resulted in a robust and reflexive analysis which has informed the write-up of this article.

Sticky harms

Material and career impact

Participants identified significant material harms that impacted their personal, career, and psychological lives due to their research focus on LGBTQ+ themes. Participants often emphasised their career and progression opportunities as heavily impacted by others' biased interpretations of their research. Participants discussed how employers sometimes perceived their work as political, providing a convenient reason for denying promotions or job applications. As one participant reflected:

> I asked for feedback on a job recently that I didn't get, and one of the feedback points was you seem like a campaigner rather than a specialist…They said it was my CV. Now, my CV is just a normal academic CV with my publications etc. etc. The only reason they're reading campaigner…into it is because of my topic, right? They wouldn't read it if my topic wasn't what it is. (FG1)

Here, the participant's experience shows that harm can be inflicted upon academics before they even secure a job, making it more difficult to become established in their field

in the first place. Though the participant explains how their CV was a traditional academic CV, listing publications, expertise, and training, the sticky political contagion of queerness (Calafell, 2020) meant that their CV was read through the framing of 'activist' rather than 'academic', and thus devalued. This aligns with previous research which has indicated that many LGBTQ+ researchers feel devalued and sidelined, due to both intellectual suspicion (Compton, D'Lane, T Meadow and K Schilt, 2018) and a dismissal of LGBTQ+ research as problematically subjective or political (Schilt, 2018).

Employed academics experienced significant risk due to job responsibilities in UK research culture. Murray (2025) indicated how academics are subject to extensive reputational work and management, including the need to be visible so as to facilitate excellent research impact and engagement. Our participants recognised this, saying that to be a successful researcher "you must be online, you must be on Twitter, you must be networking in these ways" (FG4). Participants were highly aware of the harm caused by these online spaces, including harassment, discrimination, and threats to safety and credibility. One reflected: "So what you're telling me is that in order to be academically successful I must actively push myself into a position of harm…" (FG4). As Rodriguez et al. (2025) demonstrated, LGBTQ+ researchers face substantial online hostility when conducting online recruitment due to the demonisation and pathologisation of LGBTQ+ people. A UK gender expert roundtable (Phipps and Alsop, 2025) outlined the vilification of trans people in public and legal opinion which could further contribute to the risks of making LGBTQ+ research visible in online spaces. The stickiness of misinformation around gender and the vilification of queer people, means that academic researchers' online presence could lead to employers and the public interpreting online profiles through the lens of reactionary political landscape, thus putting them at greater risk compared to colleagues working on less politicised issues.

There was a general consensus across all focus groups that social media presented risks due to the presence of anti-intellectuals, transphobic and homophobic social media users. One participant felt that senior colleagues didn't really understand the situation and "would always try and say oh you know, 'how's your online following? Are you building it up?' Without even the question of whether that's what you want to do" (FG1). This reflection suggests that there is institutional confusion, minimisation or ignorance around transphobia which is difficult to address for individuals.

Beyond social media, the threat of and actual physical harm were cited by participants as barriers to public facing work. One researcher described death and rape threats and actual physical violence as a consequence of their work (FG4), another described the risk of putting themselves in a situation where they knew they would be abused in a public event because of their identity. (FG4).

> [the risks are] very very real, and for me especially - I'm someone who's known to these people. So having that, and also being told you have to be very public facing…is basically saying that if you want a job in academia, you have to put yourself in danger. (FG4)

Whilst participants did not discuss physical violence to the same extent as social media harms, there were multiple experiences of physical harm cited throughout the focus

groups. Many spoke of this in relation to working on trans related topics, which may be subject to legal vulnerability (Duffy, 2025), gender critical feminist activism (Amery, 2024), and a general public repudiation of trans issues (Faye, 2021). Here, it is evident that the public debates and politicisation of LGBTQ+ identities, broadly defined, has led to a sticky reactive politics, whereby any discussion of LGBTQ+ issues, no matter what the focus, could lead to heightened responses from the general public, media, or antagonistic academics.

Institutional silence

There was a general view amongst participants that the harms that researchers experienced in their day-to-day work often went unacknowledged and unmitigated by their institutions. This institutional silence was sometimes also a form of harm or negligence:

> there's no appreciation of any complexity about [conducting LGBTQ+ research] and in the context of working your arse off, and maybe personal shit going on in your own life, it just makes me think I can't be arsed. Why would I do that? Why would I go out of my way to get in the press, to do a press release, to run events? (FG1)

As this participant highlights, the pressures of the institution necessitate that LGBTQ+ researchers are made visible to some extent through research dissemination and civic responsibilities (Murray, 2025; UKRI, 2025b). Whilst forced into visibility due to expectations, progression, or career development, participants felt that they negotiated the backlash without any institutional support. This led to some feelings of despondency as the quote above indicates, in which participants questioned why they should put themselves at risk when the institution did not reciprocally care for them. Many researchers indicated a sense of being worn down by the harms they negotiated in their research dissemination, however, they also felt that prior to these negative experiences, they had wanted to share their research for themselves, their community, and the academy: "I remember years ago, I wanted to run events because I felt the research mattered and I wanted to get it out there" (FG1).

Many participants felt that institutions placed the burden of safety entirely on individual researchers. Abuse was often dealt with independently, and protective strategies were often crafted and enacted alone. One participant said: "I feel like the university should be taking on more of the reputational risk, whereas at the minute, it's really placed on the individual researcher" (FG3). We interpreted this as suggesting that the university sought to extract itself from the sticky political position of LGBTQ+ lives in an attempt to appear apolitical and distant from anything deemed controversial.

Some participants condemned their institutions for failing to support researchers who had experienced abuse or backlash. There was a desire not just for private support but for public solidarity:

> The university should back their researchers and put out a statement that says we approved and funded and support this research and we think it's important and we stand in solidarity with our researchers. […] They have this huge institutional power, and it would be nice if some of that was wielded in support of queer researchers. (FG3)

The absence of institutional backing or recognition amplified the stickiness of fear amongst LGBTQ+ researchers, making it not only more intense, but more enduring. Without visible structures of protection or care, participants were left to carry the risks, fear, and harm of communicating LGBTQ+ research alone.

In contrast, some participants noted good practice and institutional support. One participant shared that, in response to a media frenzy around their research, the PR team supported them:

> …there were emails that were non-stop trying to dig for me to respond to, which the PR team were really helpful in being like just don't respond, just don't respond. But they still found ways into it, and then it explodes in ways that other people have talked about, where like suddenly it is those people online – you end up on lists, people are contacting you directly. And that was every single tabloid newspaper – your face is in it, your information is in it, and then… It was on Fox News, which was wild. (FG4)

This participant's experiences show the potential extent of digital harms for LGBTQ+ researchers who are in a highly politicised role relative to the growing far-right conservatism in the UK and globally. LGBTQ+ research sees opinions and responses sticking to it, with the potential for this stickiness to capture more and more attention, creating a space that becomes almost impossible to extract oneself from.

We show that due to political and social responses to LGBTQ+ identities in general, researchers may experience material harm in their careers, their personal and digital safety, and in relation to the freedom to act or speak. The clinging, smothering stickiness of right-wing and conservative beliefs towards LGBTQ+ lives seeps into the academic sector, creating a gruelling environment which LGBTQ+ researchers have to attempt to flourish within. Within this environment, LGBTQ+ researchers are unsupported by their institutions, who may wish to avoid the sticky politicisation often attached to LGBTQ+ lives.

Sticky fears

While the previous section addressed the tangible harms encountered by researchers sharing work on LGBTQ+ issues, this section turns to the *fear* of harm. Fear is a sticky and pervasive presence that clings to researchers, research outputs, and identities. This fear – of future abuse, backlash, misrepresentation, or professional consequences – seeps into decisions about dissemination, audience, and even career trajectory. It shapes what feels possible and survivable in higher education.

Cultures of fear and phantasms of risk

While severe past harms were clearly evident across all focus groups, participants also referred to sticky phantasms of risk: imagined, projected, and anticipated risks that shaped their decisions regarding research communication. Thus, some participants not only

referred to practical risk management, but also the sticky atmosphere and culture of fear. One participant described this atmosphere and its consequences:

> I've seen a lot of colleagues […] doing things like deleting themselves completely from the internet because they're running a public project, and things like that. And it feels really like, I don't know, there's a sort of atmosphere of fear a little bit, and people are… there's just quite a lot of tension. (FG3)

They highlighted the difficulties of their conflicted motivations: "I don't want to fear-monger myself but I also want to take caution when putting this work out there, so it's like a tightrope sometimes" (FG3).

This culture of fear also introduced self-doubt. Some participants questioned whether their caution was excessive, particularly when comparing themselves to peers who appeared to embrace a public profile. One said:

> I've constantly felt like I'm getting in my own way, […] obviously you want the work to be out there, otherwise what's the point, but at times I definitely didn't feel confident enough to put my work out there. (FG1)

Another described unknowingly presenting their research in what turned out to be a potentially hostile space. The experience went well but only, they noted, because they had not known to be afraid. They said, "there was value in the lack of awareness, because had I known, I probably would not have gone" (FG3). This haunting by imagined risk reveals how fear shapes what researchers consider possible, and how this impacts research output and research communication. For this participant, ignorance about the risk became, paradoxically, a kind of protection from the self-censorship that fear can cause.

Safety work and risk management

Many participants described a form of ongoing "safety work" (Vera-Gray 2017; see also Yelin and Clancy 2024). For our participants, safety work was a mode of risk management shaped by their sense of vulnerability and the volatility of public discourse around LGBTQ+ research. This included pre-emptive actions like vetting event attendees, curating audiences, avoiding certain dissemination formats, and self-censoring in digital spaces. Safety work became a kind of labour (Hochschild 1983) (largely invisible and unacknowledged) which was necessary to navigate LGBTQ+ visibility and the stickiness of fear.

One participant reflected on the compounded exposure that came with being both queer and researching queer lives:

> I always felt a bit ambivalent about how public I wanted my work to be. […] I feel like I am already enough visible as a queer person as it is, and I think with research about queer people and lives and things being out there, then it's even more of a layer of visibility that I sometimes welcome and sometimes really could do without, especially when it's about finding jobs and maybe thinking of a change of career. (FG3)

Visibility was experienced as both empowering and dangerous for LGBTQ+ researchers. For some, their queerness 'stuck' to their public and professional profiles in ways that were exposing and difficult to manage, especially in contexts of precarious employment. One participant described feeling emotionally and professionally exhausted to have "that queer label attached to you and your research and your profile constantly" (FG3), especially with no institutional recognition of the challenges.

Some participants described restricting their dissemination to queer or allied spaces, sometimes as invite-only. These spaces were understood as safer, but also potentially limiting. One participant described them as a "little echo chamber" (FG3). Participants' need to protect themselves and others often collided with their desire to reach broader publics.

Strategically placing limits on their audience or readership offered a sense of reassurance for a range of reasons. One international PhD student described the tension between wanting their work to be accessible and the fear of its reception in their home country:

> I'm comfortable for my thesis to be read in the UK, but in my home country when I go back, the social and political environment is very different. So, if somebody knows I'm queer, I could be thrown out of the society, I may not be able to find a house just based on my sexual identity. (FG3)

They highlighted their ambivalence: "I want my thesis to be there, to make an impact, open access, also coming from a positionality. But yet I would like to have it protected and not be read, maybe... I don't know. It's a hard one" (FG3). This example illustrates how fear sticks not just to identity but to the geopolitical situatedness of the researcher and their work, resulting in the researcher choosing to engage in safety work to protect themselves. Dissemination becomes a form of calculation, a trade-off between impact and protection, especially when the consequences of visibility differ across borders.

Precarity intensified these dilemmas. ECRs, particularly those in insecure employment, described how safety work like embargoing their thesis carried their own disadvantages. One participant noted: "embargoing is a big risk, given that I'm precariously employed and in early career at the moment" (FG3). Yet they also feared the consequences of not embargoing, especially in politically hostile environments: "without the embargo, the research could make its way into the press in a way that's not particularly conducive to further career opportunities" (FG3). Fear stuck to the thesis itself, turning it into a potential liability. Fear also stuck to precarious participants' futures. Safety work could restrict visibility and career advancement. The very strategies designed to manage risk sometimes reproduced the conditions of constraint they were meant to mitigate.

The stickiness of fear extended to researchers' concern for their research participants and audiences as well. Researchers expressed heightened concern when working with LGBTQ+ young people, feeling a strong sense of responsibility to shield them from harm. One participant explained: "I can't imagine now having young people in a [physical] space where they're talking about their experiences, with the potential risk of there being someone transphobic in the audience" (FG1). This led some to favour online formats,

even when they believed they were less effective. The same participant said they were "much more likely to [hold research events] online, even though I don't think that's necessarily the most engaging or enjoyable event for young people to be involved in" (FG1). As above, the form, benefit and reach of research communication were limited by the imperative to manage risk for researchers, as well as audience and participants.

The fear of harm described above is not reducible to over-caution. Rather, it reflects a rational response to the hostile political climate in which LGBTQ+ research is produced and disseminated. This fear sticks to people, identities, and outputs, and it shapes what, where, and to whom LGBTQ+ research can be communicated. Fear operates not only as a reaction to past experiences but as an anticipatory force, constraining the future and demanding constant, often invisible, labour.

Sticky communities

In the face of tangible sticky harms and phantasmatic sticky fears, many participants emphasised that community and peer-support was a critical aid in their careers. In this theme, *stickiness* is used to emphasise how people stick together to find support or mentors, whilst being pushed to the underbelly of the institutions that they work within due to the sometimes-cloying stickiness of queerness. The ability to stick together as a community provides researchers with the necessary support and faculties to continue in their work, which they also see as critically important for the broader LGBTQ+ community.

Finding community within academia

Many participants discussed the communities that they were part of, or looking for in the course of conducting their work. Participants drew a clear relationship between their need for community as a consequence of the lack of institutional, departmental, or work-based support:

> Networks of research have been so, so, so supportive and so helpful [...] when I needed [support] there was a community that was there, but it was never in the university [...] because of how recruitment works, there will be one queer geographer in our department, if that department is lucky, right? So I did feel that the support can almost structurally not come from the department. (FG3)

Here, the participant's experience highlighted not only the lack of institutional support, but also how the marketisation of higher education and managerial approaches to staffing and research priorities have created environments where few colleagues might understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ researchers. Consequently, many participants highlighted both the need to *find* community, but also the need to *act* as community where possible.

> you kind of build a portfolio of where and who it is safe to share research with, and where you need to put the boundaries in place. (FG4)

The willingness of many of the participants to make themselves available to others as part of a community or safety network was evident across the focus groups. As this quote indicates, through knowing one another and understanding the wider community that people were a part of, one could find safety. This is noted by Rodriguez et al. (2025) as an important resource for researchers in this area. Safety, in this context, was usually used to refer to places that were not homophobic, transphobic, or biphobic, and places where people would accept LGBTQ+ lives and research themes.

Onerous and scary community building

Whilst participants returned to the idea of community as vital in their work lives, there were also significant concerns around visibility, workload, and perceived risk through acting as a community. The decision to make oneself visible for the extended community was not without risk, with some participants explaining their fears in their workplace:

> I have a Progress flag in my office and I teach all of the sexuality modules in our department [...] I am the person holding it together, and I can't guarantee what happens institutionally, I can only guarantee what I do, and I spend a lot of time with students saying you should only come out if it's safe, because I might feel safe to you, but I am not the whole university, and I can't protect you. (FG2)

Some academics were pushed into a position of being hyper-visible within their department due to their teaching and research, leading them to act as a community and resource for their students and thus amplifying the amount of pastoral care that participants were required to complete. This was laden with fear and anxiety for some participants, due to the potential risks in giving advice around such a sensitive and personal topic. One participant highlighted this as a major issue for staff workload and wellbeing, saying that queer researchers are "on the edge of being sustainable" (FG3) This indicates that many researchers are engaging in extensive amounts of emotional labour and emotion work (Hochschild 1983) as part of their regular daily duties.

Thus here, the idea of community stickiness emerged almost as a tidal wave of treacle, smothering visible researchers with a need for support to the point of consuming their capacities. One participant's reflections on their visibility and research context further emphasised this:

> I'm anxious about PhD students [...] I get a lot of quite high-risk proposals coming through and I'm like, I can support you, but if I leave, I don't know what will happen, I don't know what institution I'd go to, I can only tell you so far what the supports in the institution will be for your project [...] who knows what will happen in three years' time when we have another change of management, change in research priorities. (FG2)

Here, this participant's involvement in supporting sexuality researchers results in feelings of anxiety, risk assessment, and future planning. This is an unsustainable and

onerous responsibility for the individual researcher, who may not find a similar access to senior community in their own workspaces, especially in a context of job insecurity and institutional instability. Some participants also highlighted that queer communities or spaces were not as intersectionally inclusive to different people, with spaces often being 'white' (FG3) and ultimately it was 'not always easy to find' (FG3) spaces that were queer and anti-racist or anti-colonial.

Community beyond academia

Even though we have shown that sexuality and gender research can be fraught, onerous, scary, and result in real harm, participants repeatedly emphasised that they wanted to do this work in their careers and for their wider communities. Many researchers referred to their work as potentially helping the wider LGBTQ+ community, directly or indirectly:

> To be able to put research out there and [...] connect groups together and connect with people who are feeling worried - that's a positive about doing LGBTQ+ work at the moment. (FG1)

This driving force of making a difference for the wider community through their work is what many of our participants returned to in their focus groups. The community beyond the university was also perceived as a space that researchers could find solace, joy, connection, pleasure, and solidarity through *sticking* together. In reference to their work on drag cultures, one participant said:

> There was something about the joy and pleasure of that work [...] the opportunity of the playfulness and the joyfulness and the stupidity of that form that allows us to lean into it. (FG1)

The participants returned to this idea throughout the conversations in the focus group. Whilst almost all participants had experienced difficulties in their careers to this point due to the hyper-visibility of queerness, and the sticky associations of their research foci, participants continued to return to the idea that this work was important, necessary, and joyful at times, particularly in relation to the current political context where LGBTQ+ lives are highly politicised.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the context of an increasingly pressured visibility due to REF research cultures, LGBTQ+ academics find themselves in a no-win position. Should they fail to develop impactful visible research, their careers might suffer due to institutional metrics and expectations. However, if they do choose to make their work visible, they risk massive backlash from public and intellectual spaces. Participants in our study with experience of taking these risks had to negotiate an onslaught of harmful commentary and confrontation, as well as career implications. In this context, many participants felt it important to develop a community and peer-support of other academics working in the area,

which could act as an informal support network in the face of the institution's absence of care. Whilst these informal communities were considered integral, participants also discussed how acting as supporters for one another took a toll when they were already stretched under the requirements of the academy. Even under all of these pressures, the LGBTQ+ researchers we spoke to were passionately committed to their research area. The general consensus was that the research they conducted was interesting and that it could have a positive effect on LGBTQ+ lives and rights more generally, thus leading to a political and affective commitment to work in these fields.

We found the completion of this study rewarding, upsetting, and frustrating. Consequently, we feel that it is critical to offer some suggestions as to how LGBTQ+ researchers and institutions might navigate these sticky dynamics. Importantly, we pessimistically believe that many of these actions may need to be undertaken by individual researchers, as opposed to hoping for significant institutional change. We also recognise that - at the time of writing - universities are themselves already negotiating significant institutional change, given the ongoing marketisation and precarity of the British academic system. That said, we offer below our suggestions for change without taking our concerns into account:

(1) **Peer support:** it is critical to develop models of academic peer-support. To make a sustainable model of peer-support, it is incumbent on institutions or departments to provide some administrative or financial support so that this is not another burden for those impacted by these conversations to negotiate.

(2) **Research Outcome Support:** The UK research culture is dominated and shaped by the REF. UK HEIs need to consider impact and research output for sensitive or highly politicised research, to ensure that researchers in this field are not beholden to similar expectations which could put them at risk.

(3) **Abuse training and responses:** Universities should better equip researchers with resources on how to respond to abuse or other risks as a consequence of conducting their research. This could include training on how to respond should these things become an issue, as well as clear guidelines for reporting and responding to abuse. Some of our participants cited excellent practice, such as Communications Teams managing researcher inboxes and social media for a period after a backlash. However, this could also include universities adequately responding to public or media harassment through citing their commitment to academic freedom and support to LGBTQ+ researchers, more generally.

(4) **Investment in wellbeing:** Many institutions have available counselling for staff members, though this is commonly capped to a limited number of sessions. Universities should engage more extensively with what wellbeing looks like for researchers producing more emotionally or politically challenging work. This could include additional and more specialist counselling, and guidance on how to include counselling budgets in funding applications, but more likely refers to our next suggestion on workloading and administration.

(5) **Workloading and administration:** Academics are overstretched in their workloads and expectations (Jayman et al., 2022; Johnson 2025; Tekeste 2025).

We suggest that universities need to adopt a model of transparent and calculable workload modelling so that researchers can better recognise pinch points and negotiate deadlines more effectively. We also suggest that researchers' duties are often expanded through the needs of HEIs; committees, pastoral duties, personal tutoring, and more, can form the basis of extensive and unrecognised work. We suggest that more funding should be allocated to professional services roles which could more appropriately respond to some of the pastoral or administrative pressures placed on academics.

(6) **Staffing and resourcing:** It is common for LGBTQ+ academics to be the only academic with that specialty in the department, due to the need to have representative fields of study within disciplines. Whilst this may be unavoidable, we suggest that line managers, HR, and heads of school engage with appropriate training on LGBTQ+ related issues and risk management to avoid detrimental impacts on career progression and hiring practices.

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ORCID iD

Rosie Ola-Marie ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1885-9625

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Dr Rosie Ola-Marie (they/them) is a Senior Lecturer in Gender at the University of Bristol. Ola Marie's research interests include qualitative research methodologies, feminism, queer theory, sexuality studies, sociodigital spaces, creative methods, and many other things that flicker and fade depending on the year.

Charlotte Jones (she/her) is a Sociology Lecturer at Swansea University. Her research sits at the intersection of gender, sexuality, disability and medicine, and sociological analyses of power, care, and knowledge.

Amy Ryall (she/her) is Knowledge Exchange and Impact Manager at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She has a background in history teaching and museum learning and had worked in research impact roles since 2012. She is interested in the conflict between REF and other formal measurements of research impact and researcher integrity and well-being.

Tig Slater (they/them) is an Associate Professor in Queer Disability Studies at the Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University. Their research draws on disability, queer, trans and gender studies. They are interested in critical explorations of bodies, developmental discourse, issues of accessibility, and institutional Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies.