

LGBTQ2+: Researches interview adults about their experiences coming out

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In an era of unprecedented LGBTQ2+ visibility coupled with incredible backlash, coming out as a sexual minority can be a deeply ambivalent experience, according to new research.

In a study published in *Theory and Society*, sociologists Dr. Amin

Ghaziani and Andy Holmes conducted in-depth interviews with 52 adult Vancouverites about their experiences coming out over the last five years.

We spoke to Dr. Ghaziani, professor in the UBC department of sociology and Canada Research Chair in Urban Sexualities, about the findings.

Why were you interested in recent experiences of coming out?

Coming out is about sharing your identity with someone, and it's an ongoing process that happens at different times with different people.

In the 1980s and 1990s, coming out was a transformative act, although still very much a struggle, in a homophobic society. In the 2000s and 2010s, the narrative changed from what we might call "struggle and success" to "emancipation" as people in the West generally found more acceptance in society. Coming out became less formal and less fraught.

Today, LGBTQ2+ people have more visibility than ever before, with more than four percent of Canada's population identifying as LGBTQ2+ and 7.2% for American adults in a 2022 Gallup poll, double what it was when Gallup first measured sexuality a decade ago.

Despite political progress on both sides of the border, there's been a lot of troubling backlash. In Vancouver, violent anti-trans hate crimes have been on the rise for a few years. And in the U.S., state legislatures introduced 525 anti-LGBTQ2+ bills just this year.

We live in a curious moment today of unprecedented progress and brutal backlash. How do these crisscrossing currents affect coming out? That's

what we wanted to figure out.

What did you find?

In short, it's complicated. Neither a narrative of struggle and success nor emancipation fully captures what it's like to come out today. Instead, we found that people are deeply ambivalent.

One reason for this ambivalence is an awareness among young people today of significant generational differences. For example, Hugh, a Chinese gay man we spoke to, saw firsthand how attitudes differ between Gen Z, for whom coming out is often met with easy acceptance, and older colleagues at work who were thrown out of their homes when they came out.

For Hugh, a millennial, coming out was somewhere in between. It was "awful," he said, and it took years to plan, but when it happened, "it just happened," and didn't feel triumphant.

Pride celebrations can make things more confusing. Another respondent, Silky, describes why it's hard to come out this time of year. "I don't feel like I belong because I'm dating a man," she told us. Although Silky lives in Davie Village, where "Pride is literally happening all around my house," she hears "gay people in the crowd" who say things like, "I hate all these straight couples at Pride."

Hearing this makes Silky, who identifies as bi, feel like an outsider. As she says, "I feel a little bit more like I belong when I'm not physically with my partner, which is really sad. I shouldn't have to walk around Pride wearing this big shirt that says, "I'm bi.""

What can be done to support individuals wanting to

come out today?

Most people live in a gray area in between the extremes of a liberal, accepting society and one wracked by relentless bigotry and discrimination. That affects how we think about our sexuality: it distinguishes us, but it doesn't necessarily define us, at least not all the time.

When it comes to practical steps, institutions still play a big role in the after-effects of coming out goes. Having policies that protect against discrimination based on [sexual orientation](#) and [gender identity](#) is crucial for creating supportive environments. But when it comes to matters of culture, like what we see on the silver screen, we need more diversity of voices so people can understand and appreciate that there are many ways of coming out and identifying as LGBTQ2+.

More information: Amin Ghaziani et al, Distinguishing but not defining: How ambivalence affects contemporary identity disclosures, *Theory and Society* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s11186-023-09521-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-023-09521-8)

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