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Original research article

Feelings of difference, social support, and well-being among LGBT+ youth

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Abstract
This study examines the relationships between adolescents' feelings of difference, social support, and subjective well-being, with a particular focus on pupils who report their feelings of difference as being related to sexual orientation identity. The aim of the study was to analyze the associations between the subjective experience of feelings of difference in the school environment, the availability of social support from various sources, and adolescents' psychological well-being. The research sample consisted of 704 pupils from grades 7–9 of lower secondary schools and grades 1–2 of upper secondary schools from different regions of the Czech Republic. Data were collected through an anonymous questionnaire administered in classrooms. Well-being was measured using the YP-CORE scale, while social support was assessed by the MSPSS scale, with additional items on the school environment. The results indicated that feelings of difference were significantly negatively associated with subjective well-being, and pupils who reported a feeling of difference experienced substantially lower levels of peer social support. In contrast, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to overall social support. Pupils with feelings of difference related to LGBT+ identity reported the lowest levels of subjective well-being and lower levels of social support (peers and parents). The findings highlight the importance of social support as a key protective factor in adolescence and underscore the need for inclusive school environments.

Keywords: Education; Feelings of difference; Inclusion; LGBT+; Pupils; Students; Social support; Well-being

Introduction

Adolescents' psychological well-being is a key indicator of both mental health and successful school adjustment. Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by intense identity formation, the development of self-concept, and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation (Arnett, 2000; Branje et al., 2018; Erikson, 1994). During this stage, well-being is closely intertwined with adolescents' experiences within their social environment. Young people actively seek out their place in society, compare themselves to others, and construct their sense of self-worth on the basis of social feedback (Harter, 2012). Within this context, the school environment serves not only as an educational setting, but also constitutes a primary social setting in which adolescents engage in substantial interpersonal interaction (Allen and Kern, 2019; Bond et al., 2007). It is within this context that experiences of acceptance, belonging, and competence are developed alongside experiences of rejection, exclusion, and social comparison. One factor that may shape these experiences is a feeling of difference, conceptualized as the subjective perception of being different from one's peers. Although experiencing some degree of difference is normal, its psychological significance depends largely on the social environment. Under certain circumstances, it may foster individuality and identity development, whereas in others it may become a significant barrier to psychosocial development (Harter, 2012; Thoits, 2011).

Adolescence and school well-being

Adolescent well-being is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional experiences, life satisfaction, and a sense of meaning and purpose (Bücker et al., 2018). During adolescence, well-being is closely associated with the successful accomplishment of key developmental tasks, particularly identity formation and the consolidation of self-concept (Crocetti et al., 2025, Erikson, 1994).

At the same time, adolescence is characterized by heightened vulnerability to stress and mental health difficulties (Bethune, 2019; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023–

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2025). Consequently, well-being is regarded as a dynamic indicator that reflects not only adolescents' current psychological functioning but also their capacity to adapt to demands of the environment. In this process, interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging are crucial (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

The school environment constitutes one of the primary contexts in which these developmental processes unfold. The quality of the school climate, peer relationships, and interactions with teachers plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' subjective well-being and their adjustment to school (Bond et al., 2007; Trautwein et al., 2026).

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by profound biological, psychological, and social changes that unfold with considerable variability (Langmeier and Krejčířová, 2006; Vágnerová, 2020). During this stage, young people negotiate key developmental tasks. These include forming an identity, increasing autonomy, and establishing interpersonal relationships (Erikson, 1994), while being more sensitive to the opinions of others (Harter, 2012).

These developmental processes shape adolescents' experiences within the school environment and influence their capacity to cope with social and academic challenges. Consequently, adverse experiences at school may undermine motivation, school adjustment, and mental health, as well as contribute to the development of more persistent psychological difficulties (Russell et al., 2014).

Feelings of difference during adolescence as a psychosocial stressor

In the present study, feelings of difference are conceptualized as an individual's subjective perception of being different from their reference group of classmates. This perception emerges through processes of social comparison and reflected appraisal, reflecting the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as similar to, or different from, their peers (Festinger, 1954; Harter, 2012). Feelings of difference do not necessarily correspond to objective individual characteristics but rather represent a subjective interpretation of one's social position. As such, these feelings of difference may both contribute to and result from a diminished sense of belonging (Allen and Kern, 2019; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In certain social contexts, feelings of difference may also function as a psychosocial stressor and amplify stigmatization and minority stress (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003).

From a developmental perspective, feelings of difference are not necessarily maladaptive. During adolescence, these types of feelings represent a normative aspect of identity development, as young people begin to differentiate themselves from others while exploring different roles, values, and forms of self-expression (Arnett, 2000; Crocetti et al., 2018; Erikson, 1994). Such differentiation fosters the development of individuality and authenticity. The psychological significance of feelings of difference, however, depend largely on their intensity and the social context within which they surface (Crocetti et al., 2018; Harter, 2012).

Within the school environment, where processes of social comparison are particularly salient (Festinger, 1954), feelings of difference influence adolescents' social position within the peer group, as well as their access to, and receipt of, social support. When experienced along with rejection, stigmatization, or social exclusion, these feelings may become a significant psychosocial stressor (Pascoe and Smart Richman, 2009; Thoits, 2011). Such experiences are associated with an increased risk of mental health difficulties and reduced well-being (Delozier et al., 2020; Freitas et al., 2017). However, their psychological impact depends largely on the quality of the surrounding social environment, particularly the extent to which acceptance, inclusion, and support are present.

Ultimately, whether feelings of difference promote or inhibit identity development depends on how the social environment is influenced by individual differences. A social context characterized by acceptance and inclusion may transform perceived differences into a resource for personal growth, whereas a social context characterized by stigma and rejection may perpetuate vulnerability and psychological stress.

LGBT+ adolescents at school

Among LGBT+ adolescents, feelings of difference are often associated with stress from prevailing social norms regarding sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). These experiences can be understood within the minority stress framework, which conceptualizes chronic stress as associated with belonging to a stigmatized social group or possessing a stigmatized identity (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Meyer, 2003).

Within the school environment, these processes can be reinforced by heteronormativity and a lack of inclusivity (Herek, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2018). Consequently, LGBT+ adolescents are at increased risk of experiencing rejection, choosing to conceal their identity, and being bullied and harassed, all of which are associated with poorer mental health and less favorable school adjustment (Gorman et al., 2023; Johns et al., 2018).

Social support as a key protective factor during adolescence

Social support helps adolescents to cope with stress and promotes psychological well-being (Taylor, 2011; Thoits, 2011). Conversely, the absence of social support among adolescents may contribute to psychological stress (Křivohlavý, 2001; Mareš et al., 2001). During adolescence, social support is primarily provided by family, peers, and the school environment, all of which play distinct roles in adolescents' psychosocial development (Rueger et al., 2016; Thoits, 2011).

Supportive relationships buffer the adverse effects of stressful experiences, including experiencing feelings of difference and minority stress, while fostering adolescents' sense of belonging and self-worth (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Ryan et al., 2010). Consequently, the availability of social support plays an important role in understanding the association between feelings of difference and adolescents' levels of well-being.

Despite growing research on adolescent well-being, social support, and minority stress, empirical evidence examining these relationships in the Czech context remains limited. By addressing this gap, our study contributes to a better understanding of adolescent well-being in schools.

Materials and methods

Research aim

The aim of this study was to examine the relationships between feelings of difference, social support, and subjective well-being among adolescents in the school context. Particular attention was paid to both overall perceived social support and support from specific sources, especially family, peers, and teachers (Rueger et al., 2016; Thoits, 2011). Special emphasis was placed on students reporting LGBT+ feelings of difference. For these pupils, adverse mental health outcomes may be intensified considering the minority stress model and experiences resulting from stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Meyer, 2003; Pitoňák, 2022). The study further aimed to examine whether

adolescents reporting different forms of feelings of difference varied in social support levels and subjective well-being.

Based on this overarching aim, the study pursued three specific objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between feelings of difference and subjective well-being.
2. To examine the association between feelings of difference and perceived social support, both overall and across different sources of support.
3. To compare students reporting LGBT+ feelings of difference with their peers in terms of perceived social support and subjective well-being.

Based on previous empirical evidence, we expected feelings of difference to be negatively associated with both subjective well-being and perceived social support, including support from family, peers, and teachers. Furthermore, we expected adolescents reporting LGBT+-related feelings of difference to report lower levels of perceived social support from family, peers, and teachers, as well as lower subjective well-being, than their peers.

Sample, data collection, and data analysis

The sample consisted of 704 students from 35 classes in lower and upper secondary schools in the Czech Republic (Grades 7–9 of lower secondary schools and Grades 1–2 of upper secondary schools). Of these 704 students, 272 (39%) reported experiencing feelings of difference. Schools were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to ensure diversity within the sample.

Data were collected during regular class periods using an online questionnaire administered through LimeSurvey GmbH, Version 6.6.6. The questionnaire was administered by a trained member of the research team. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, with particular emphasis placed on confidentiality and creating a safe environment.

Anonymity was ensured with pseudonyms, and all data were processed and analyzed in aggregate form. The questionnaire comprised 19 items organized into seven thematic sections and combined standardized instruments (e.g., PIRLS, PISA, YP-CORE, SLSS, and MSPSS) with items specifically developed for use in the Czech educational environment.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, Charles University (UKPedf/12337/2024), and was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards. Informed consent from participants' legal guardians was obtained prior to data collection. Consent forms were distributed to parents through the students' class teachers before the study commenced.

Measures

Well-being

Well-being was assessed using the 10-item Young Person's Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (YP-CORE) questionnaire, which measures psychological well-being (psychological distress) experienced during the previous seven days. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 to 4. The total score was calculated as the sum of all items, with positively worded items reverse-coded; higher scores indicated experiencing greater psychological stress.

The YP-CORE has demonstrated good psychometric properties ($\alpha \approx 0.80$; Twigg et al., 2016). The Czech version of the instrument used in this study yielded good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.829$).

Social support

Social support was measured using the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988) in its Czech adaptation (Pitoňák et al., 2024). The scale assesses perceived support from family, friends, and a significant other, and demonstrated excellent reliability in our study ($\alpha \approx 0.85$–0.91; overall $\alpha = 0.88$).

In the present sample, internal consistency was high (overall Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.926$; significant other $\alpha = 0.902$, family $\alpha = 0.845$, friends $\alpha = 0.912$). The MSPSS was supplemented with a four-item subscale assessing school social support (i.e., support from classmates and teachers), which demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.760$).

Feelings of difference and LGBT+ feelings of difference

Feelings of difference were assessed using a single item measuring respondents' subjective perception of feeling different among their classroom peers: "Do you feel different in any way? Do you feel that you are different from the other students in your class?" Responses were recorded on a four-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "Yes, very different" to "No, I feel completely the same".

Respondents who indicated that they felt different were subsequently asked to identify the reasons for their feelings of difference. Response options included, among others, "my minority sexual orientation (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.)" and "my gender identity (e.g., non-binary, transgender)". The category of students reporting LGBT+ feelings of difference was created by identifying respondents who selected at least one of the two responses.

Thus, in the present study, this category encapsulates not only self-identification as LGBT+, but also the experience of feeling different because of one's LGBT+ identity. This categorical approach was chosen because the aim of the study was to assess feelings of difference within the school environment and how these were related to social support and well-being, rather than to classify participants' responses based solely on identity. From an interpretive perspective, it is important to recognize that feelings of difference are inherently examined relative to social group diversity. As such, in groups characterized by norms that foster and promote inclusion (i.e., the acceptance of diversity) and greater numbers of individuals sharing the same or a similar diversity characteristic (e.g., LGBT+), individuals may perceive themselves as differing less from their counterparts.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using standard statistical procedures, including independent-samples t-tests with Welch's correction, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), Pearson correlation analysis, and linear regression analyses.

To address the first specific research aim, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between feelings of difference and subjective well-being. In addition, differences in subjective well-being between groups were assessed using one-way Welch's ANOVA. Effect sizes (r and η^2) were reported for both analyses.

To address the second specific research aim, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in overall and peer social support. Welch's correction was applied when the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated. Effect sizes were reported using Cohen's d.

To address the third specific research aim, a series of linear regression analyses were conducted, with the type of feelings of difference as the independent variable, and perceived social

support (overall and by source) and subjective well-being as the dependent variables. Model fit (R^2 and the F-test), as well as the statistical significance of the regression coefficients, were evaluated.

For all analyses, the significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$. Effect sizes were systematically reported alongside significance tests.

Results

Results for specific objective 1:
Analyses addressing the first research question demonstrated a statistically significant negative association between feelings of difference in the classroom and subjective well-being. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a moderate negative correlation between the level of feelings of difference and overall subjective well-being, $r(702) = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that higher levels of feelings of difference were associated with lower levels of psychological well-being.

This finding was further supported by the comparison of group differences using one-way Welch's ANOVA. Adolescents reporting higher levels of feelings of difference exhibited significantly lower subjective well-being than those reporting lower levels of feelings of difference, $F(1, 552) = 95.50$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.15$. Together, these findings consistently indicate that feelings of difference represent an important risk factor for adolescents' subjective well-being.

In the following analyses, the term 'LGBT+-related feelings of difference' refers to self-reported feelings of difference attributed to minority sexual orientation and/or gender identity rather than to self-identified LGBT+ status.

Results for specific objective 2:
Analyses addressing the second research question examined differences in perceived social support between adolescents reporting feelings of difference and those who did not. No statistically significant differences were found in overall perceived social support. In contrast, adolescents reporting feelings of difference perceived significantly lower levels of peer social support than those who did not report feelings of difference, $t(474) = -8.13$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.65$, indicating a medium effect size.

Although adolescents who reported feelings of difference also reported lower overall perceived social support than their peers (M = 121.28 vs. M = 134.60), this difference did not reach statistical significance, Welch's $t(474) = 0.81$, $p = 0.416$, Cohen's $d = 0.07$, indicating a negligible effect size.

Results for specific objective 3:
Analyses addressing the third research question examined whether adolescents reporting LGBT+-related feelings of difference differed from their peers in perceived social support and subjective well-being. No statistically significant differences were found in overall perceived social support. However, significant differences were observed across specific sources of social support and in subjective well-being.

Linear regression analyses indicated that adolescents reporting gender identity or sexual orientation as the reason for their feelings of difference perceived significantly lower levels of peer social support than their peers ($R^2 = 0.096$, $p < 0.001$). Similar results were found for parental and teacher support. The model including LGBT+-related feelings of difference as a predictor explained 7.4% of the variance in parental support ($R^2 = 0.074$, $p < 0.001$), with adolescents reporting LGBT+-related feelings of difference perceiving significantly lower parental support than the reference group. A statistically significant, although weaker, effect was also observed for teacher support ($R^2 = 0.023$, $p < 0.01$).

The strongest effect was observed for subjective well-being. The regression model explained 14.2% of the variance in subjective well-being ($R^2 = 0.142$, $p < 0.001$), with adolescents reporting LGBT+-related feelings of difference exhibiting significantly lower levels of subjective well-being than their peers.

Overall, these findings indicate that LGBT+ feelings of difference were associated with lower subjective well-being and lower perceived social support, particularly in the domains of peer relationships and family support. In contrast, the composite measure of overall social support did not fully capture these differences (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of results

Findings	Dependent variable	Predictor / Groups	Result	Effect size
Specific objective1	Subjective well-being	Level of feelings of difference	$r(702) = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$	—
Specific objective 1	Subjective well-being	Groups based on the level of feelings of difference	$F(1, 552) = 95.50$, $p < 0.001$	$\eta^2 = 0.15$
Specific objective 2	Overall social support	Level of feelings of difference	$t(474) = 0.81$, $p = 0.416$	$d = 0.07$
Specific objective 2	Peer social support	Level of feelings of difference	$t(474) = -8.13$, $p < 0.001$	$d = 0.65$
Specific objective 3	Overall social support	LGBT+ feelings of difference	–	—
Specific objective 3	Peer social support	LGBT+ feelings of difference	$R^2 = 0.096$, $p < 0.001$	—
Specific objective 3	Parental social support	LGBT+ feelings of difference	$R^2 = 0.074$, $p < 0.001$	—
Specific objective 3	Teacher social support	LGBT+ feelings of difference	$R^2 = 0.023$, $p < 0.01$	—
Specific objective 3	Subjective well-being	LGBT+ feelings of difference	$R^2 = 0.142$, $p < 0.001$	—

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the relationships between feelings of difference, social support, and subjective well-being among adolescents, with particular attention to students who reported LGBT+ feelings of difference. The findings support theoretical models emphasizing the importance of belonging, social relationships, and minority stress for psychological well-being (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003). They further suggest that feelings of difference are associated with diverse psychosocial outcomes depending on its social meaning and the availability of social support.

The present study identified a moderate negative association between feelings of difference and subjective well-being, consistent with previous research demonstrating an increased risk of mental health difficulties among adolescents experiencing marginalization (Lucassen et al., 2017; Price-Feeney et al., 2020). These findings suggest that feelings of difference are associated with lower subjective well-being and may reflect challenges related to social belonging and inclusion.

Regarding perceived social support, adolescents reporting feelings of difference perceived significantly lower levels of peer support, whereas no significant differences were observed in overall perceived social support. This finding is consistent with the central role of peer relationships during adolescence (Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011; Harter, 2012). It also aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of school climate and the role of teachers in shaping and regulating social relationships within the classroom (Burger et al., 2022; Simons et al., 2024; Smetáčková et al., 2022).

Furthermore, adolescents reporting LGBT+-related feelings of difference perceived lower levels of peer, parental, and teacher support, as well as lower subjective well-being, than their peers, whereas no significant differences were observed in overall perceived social support. These findings are consistent with the minority stress model (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003) and previous research documenting the elevated risk of mental health difficulties among LGBTQ+ adolescents (Kosciw et al., 2023; Russell and Fish, 2016). In particular, the results underscore the importance of parental support as a key protective factor (Katz-Wise et al., 2023; Ryan et al., 2010), while suggesting that teacher support, although beneficial, may not fully compensate for the absence of support from parents and peers.

Exploratory findings further suggest that feelings of difference are not uniformly associated with negative outcomes; rather, their impact depends on the extent to which the feelings are socially validated. Whereas stigmatized forms of feelings of difference were associated with lower well-being, feelings of difference related to giftedness may instead be associated with more positive psychosocial functioning (Crocetti et al., 2018; Harter, 2012).

From a practical perspective, study findings highlight the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive school climate that promotes psychological safety and respect for diversity (Bond et al., 2007; Kosciw et al., 2018). Preventive interventions aimed at strengthening socio-emotional competencies and enhancing the quality of peer relationships also appear to play an important role (Durlak et al., 2011). Particular attention should be given to students experiencing multiple sources of vulnerability, especially adolescents reporting LGBT+ feelings of difference, including efforts to strengthen support within the family environment (Ehrensaft et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2010) and school environment (Invited Symposium, 2024; Simons and Russell, 2021).

Overall, the findings suggest that feelings of difference during adolescence are associated with lower subjective well-being, particularly when they are socially stigmatized or accompanied by reduced peer and parental support.

One limitation of the present study is the potential selection bias resulting from the combination of purposive and convenience sampling of schools. Schools that agreed to participate may have been more open to issues related to diversity, inclusion, and mental health. Conversely, schools with lower sensitivity to these topics may have been less likely to allow students to participate, particularly because feelings of difference – especially when related to LGBT+ identity – may be perceived as a sensitive or controversial topic. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Another limitation concerns the hierarchical structure of the data, which was not accounted for using multilevel modeling. Although participants were nested within specific schools and classrooms that constituted their social reference context, the primary unit of analysis was the individual student. Consequently, group-level effects were not examined as part of the analyses.

Conclusion

The findings indicated that feelings of difference were significantly associated with adolescents' psychosocial adjustment, and the nature of these associations varied according to the source of social support. Feelings of difference were associated with lower levels of peer social support and showed a moderate negative association with subjective well-being. Overall perceived social support did not fully capture these differences, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between specific sources of support. Social support nonetheless emerged as an important protective factor.

Particular attention was paid to students reporting LGBT+-related feelings of difference, as minority stress theory suggests that LGBT+ adolescents may constitute a particularly vulnerable group. The analyses showed that these students reported lower levels of social support and the lowest levels of subjective well-being among the groups examined in Czech schools.

The findings underscore the importance of a supportive and inclusive school environment that fosters students' sense of safety and belonging. Owing to the cross-sectional design of the study, however, the direction of these associations cannot be determined, and causal conclusions should not be drawn. Nevertheless, the findings are consistent with theoretical models of belonging, social support, and minority stress, further supporting the importance of an inclusive school climate that promotes psychological safety for all students and respect for diversity.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs, incorporate qualitative approaches, and examine different forms of feelings of difference and specific sources of social support in greater depth.

Overall, the findings suggest that the ways in which schools respond to student differences may have important implications for adolescents' psychological well-being and psychosocial development.

Use of generative artificial intelligence tools

Generative AI tools were used exclusively for language editing and proofreading.

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Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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