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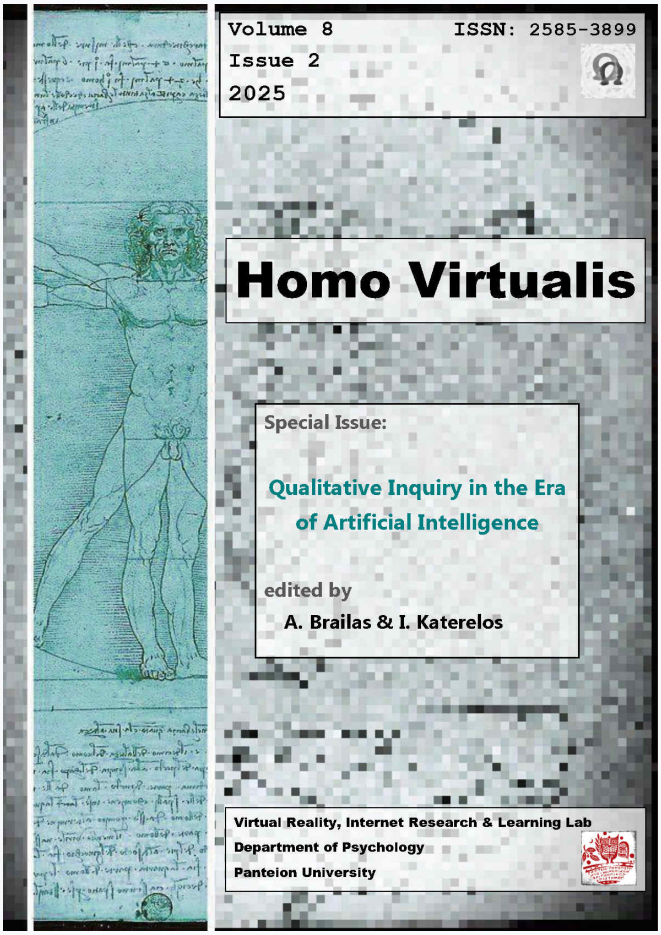

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Conditional inclusivity. 20 Conversations about current issues within the LGBTQ+ community

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Abstract: The LGBTQ+ community is often treated as a unified group, yet -upon closer inspection- the conflicts and discrepancies within begin to show. This paper attempts to examine whether LGBTQ+ individuals in Greece feel included within the community and, if not, suggest possible reasons behind their detachment. 20 members of the LGBTQ+ community participated in semi-structured interviews, which were subsequently analyzed via Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), resulting in seven fundamental themes that shape the current state of the community; contested identity, the importance of physical appearance, political correctness, elitism, toxicity, labelling and the stance towards the heterosexual population. Despite those issues, however, a deeper emotional connection to the community -or the idea of one- seems to persevere.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, heteronormativity, bi-erasure, elitism, labelling

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Introduction

Despite the vast majority of available research on the LGBTQ+ community examining its members as a unified group (Beverage & Herschell, 2023; Chan et al., 2022; Flores, 2019; Miscioscia, 2022), the reality seems to differ. One must look no further than the 25 alternative flags currently uploaded on the Human Rights Campaign website, each a different variation of the 'Pride' rainbow flag representing a distinct sub-group within the community (Mulroy & Bravo, 2024).

First, one must consider the long-standing transphobia within the community (McCormick & Barthelemy, 2021; McLean & Cicero, 2023), dating back to Stonewall and still surviving, as evidenced by the 'Terf Wars' (Pearce et al., 2020). The phenomenon of bi-erasure, meaning that bisexuals are often written off as non-members of the community, is equally well-established (Morgenroth et al., 2022; Parmenter et al., 2019), sparking the viral #StillBisexual campaign that defends the validity of the bisexual identity (Compton, 2017). One must also take into account gay men's chronic conflict with lesbian women (Blumell & Rodgriguez, 2020; Hale & Ojeda, 2018)

Besides the tensions between different sub-groups, the community's cohesion is also tested by tensions inside each sub-group. **Gay men** have seemingly fragmented into several distinct 'tribes', defined by appearance, status and masculinity, among others (Chow, 2022; Miller, 2017; Smith & Brown, 2020). Among **lesbian women**, feminine presenting lesbians face intra-group scrutiny (Clarke & Spence, 2012; Hutson, 2011), Within the **trans group**, inequalities are noted among assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB), assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) and non-binary trans individuals (Martinez & McDonald, 2021; Thorne et al., 2018; Todd et al., 2019).

Discrepancies are exacerbated when other societal factors come into play, as set forth in Crenshaw's ever-relevant analysis of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Such societal factors may include **race**, with white LGBTQ+ members discriminating against -and/or fetishizing- racial minorities (Bowleg, 2013; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Parmenter et al., 2019), **age** (Bryant-Lees & Kite, 2020; Harris, 2019) and **social class** (Burnes & Singh, 2016), among others. The intersectionality of those factors creates a continuum, with one polar being the young, upper-class, attractive, white, cisgender, gay man; the further an individual is from those traits (i.e., an old, impoverished, black, transgender woman), the worse their position is bound to be (McCormick & Barthelemy, 2021; Parmenter et al., 2019).

Considering the above, and in light of Greek society's growing knowledge and support of the LGBTQ+ agenda (e.g. the recent legalization of marriage between same-sex partners) as well as the increasing diversification of the LGBTQ+ population, this paper aims to shed light to the inside of the community in Greece. Through a string of semi-structured interviews and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, I will try to gain insight on the perceived inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in their own community. Do all different members of the community feel unified under

its umbrella or have they branched out, resulting in fragmentation? What are their conflicts with the other sub-groups and why do they remain unresolved? And, in the end, do they care to resolve them?

Methodology

This research was conducted based on a qualitative research design. All data was collected via semi-structured interviews; a choice made due to the complexity of the matter and the lack of consistent past findings that would allow for fully pre-selected questions. Based on available past research, the core questions concerned the feeling of belonging ("Do you feel included in the community? If not, why do you feel this way? Can you remember a particular moment when you felt alienated?", "Have you ever felt doubted by the community?", "How would you describe an individual that seems included in the community? What traits helped them fit in?"), while also touching on other themes such as the existence of an LGBTQ+ circle ("Do you have an LGBTQ+ circle and if so, how and when was it created?"), the experiences in LGBTQ+ spaces ("Do you frequent queer clubs/events and Pride and if so, do you feel comfortable there?"), the importance of physical appearance and sexual activity and the general stance towards the community. Interviews were conducted between April and August of 2024, in person or via teleconference.

All 20 interviewees participated voluntarily and were recruited either by me reaching out in my circuit of acquaintances (avoiding close friends) or by other participants (snowball sampling). Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 42 and they were selected to cover as much of the LGBTQ+ spectrum as possible: the sample includes 3 lesbian women, 7 gay men, 2 bisexual women, 3 trans individuals (2 trans masc and 1 trans fem), 2 non-binary individuals, 1 genderfluid individual, 1 queer woman and 1 pansexual woman.

Adherence to ethics was ensured by the voluntary participation model and by informing each participant in detail about the topic, the context and the process before getting their consent, as well as explicitly giving them the ability to stop the interview at any point or to refuse to answer any question. Special attention was given to respecting the participants' privacy and boundaries, not insisting on matters that seemed upsetting or overly sensitive and closing the interview in an empowering manner, incorporating elements of appreciative inquiry (Brailas, 2025b). All participants offered explicit consent for the recording of the interview and were informed that they could ask for the deletion of part of or the entire recording. Participants were assured their answers would only be used in the context of this research and that they would be anonymized in the final paper. Indeed, all individuals are herein referred to with one initial letter (not of their real name) and an age that is close –but not equal- to their real age, while their sexual orientation and gender are the only aspects presented as stated. All possibly identifying elements

(names of cities, universities, detailed descriptions) were omitted. Participants were told that they would be informed regarding the results of the research.

The collected data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); an approach that explores the subjective and personal lived experience of the individual and tries to depict its subject matter based on how these individuals perceive and experience it, as well as attribute meaning to the described experiences in conjunction with a social, cultural or theoretical context (Willig, 2013). Starting with 42 initial codes, which were isolated via Thematic Analysis based on common threads of meaning that recurred in at least two interviews, further analysis narrowed most ideas down to the following 7 themes: contested identity, the importance of physical appearance, political correctness, elitism, toxicity, labelling and stance towards the heterosexual population.

Findings

A) Contested identity – *Not Like Us*

Every participant that identified outside the L/G groups, brought up the concept of their identity being called into question by other members of the community. Trans, non-binary and bisexual individuals feel that their identity is not immediately believed and validated by other LGBTQ+ members and, therefore, they often feel obligated to "**explain**" themselves, as many phrased it.

The nature of the disbelief varies. For K. (genderfluid, 25), their self-identification is brushed off as a phase and, consequently, K is treated as a straight woman. L. (non-binary, 26) finds that their chosen pronouns are rarely respected even in contexts, such as dating apps, where they are explicitly stated in their profile. Similarly C. (non-binary, 24) has to **"choose [their] battles"** and accept that most people continue to address them using female pronouns. X. (trans masc, 27) corroborates L's and C's feelings, emphasizing that the non-binary identity is invalidated even within the trans community. X. has met significant difficulty in introducing himself by a male name, recounting a particularly dismissive encounter with a lesbian woman, and perceives that even those who address him by male pronouns, do so disingenuously, treating it as a **"game"** while essentially still viewing X. as a woman.

R. (queer, 33) stated that her identity seems "a bit funny, a bit foreign" to the lesbian women she has dated, with some even considering it cowardice.

> "I perceive, from other women, who identify as lesbian, that for them it was a battle […], a personal battle to identify that way. And who am I to come and spoil it? […] That I may be betraying all that effort. [That they are wondering] 'Why? You are a lesbian, why don't you say it? Are you afraid?'"

This perception of cowardice may be a fundamental cause to the phenomenon of **"bi-erasure"**, whose endurance is confirmed by both bisexual participants (H., 31 and Th., 31) as well as some non-bisexual participants (B., 30 and G., 26, both gay

men). Th. (bisexual woman, 31) believes that the community at large omits to speak about bisexuality and recounts a hurtful moment when a gay friend jokingly asked her *"what are you even doing here?"* at the Pride parade; a moment she has internalized, often wondering if she's a **"fraud"**. She details how she felt that her orientation had to be "**proven**", not just by declaration but by actively entering a relationship with another woman. However, even after such a relationship, she still felt her bisexuality questioned when her next relationship was with a straight man.

> "I felt like I had said I was a lesbian and now I was taking it back… which I had never said […] I feel like I don't exist […] I can either exist as a woman in a relationship with a straight man or as a woman in a relationship with a lesbian."

N. (pansexual, 30) felt similarly when she talked to her LGBTQ+ friends about dating a man, receiving a **"judgemental"** response, which ruptured the friendship. Both bisexual participants also lamented their absence from the spaces of the community, both unaware of where those even are.

Having one's identity contested becomes even more hurtful when it comes from a partner, something both non-binary participants (L. and C.) have experienced in recent relationships. E. (lesbian, 29) has had partners express disbelief on whether she was truly a lesbian, which she considers a reflection of their need for maximum certainty before entering into a relationship, remarking that lesbian relationships, in particular, are "extremely monogamous" and "closed". Th. (bisexual woman, 31) believes women are suspicious towards her bisexuality for the same reason, while, on the opposite end, M.A. (gay, 32) mentioned his own disbelief towards the bisexuality of his partner.

On a positive note, E. (lesbian 29) believes that such disbelief lessens with time; now that she is older, one cannot dismiss her sexuality as a phase. Also, the rise of social media allows everyone to identify themselves explicitly, without other form of proof being necessary.

B) **Physical Appearance:** ***Looking the part***

Physical appearance as a discriminating factor within the community came up in 3 different forms.

First, the most obvious: **attractiveness** – brought up primarily by gay men. T. (gay, 29) talked about the "**dismissive looks**" he gets in nightclubs and the immediate and unforgiving **"scanning"** gay men perform on other gay men, often leading to instant rejection on looks alone. D. (gay, 32) also felt scanned (like an "X-ray", in his words) by a group of attractive gays in his college years, while P. (gay, 36) also cited the "**judgemental looks**" he receives from other men in gay clubs as the reason why he avoids those clubs altogether, opting to flirt through apps instead, and why, even when he does visit a club, he avoids eye contact, acting as if the men around him "don't exist".

Many participants spoke on the "**gay man archetype"** that dictates the desirable appearance; a masculine, muscly body, according to P., M.A. and T., the latter likening that image to a **"Ken Doll**", further underlining that a Ken will only mingle with other Kens. G. (gay, 26), while agreeing an archetype exists, described it in very different terms -his alpha emphasized stylishness and elegance over physicality- reflecting the subjective perception and internalization of the archetype. Other than subjective, the archetype is also fluid; A. (lesbian, 42) recalls that her generation viewed her as too "**butch**" ("like a 90's junkie") to be attractive as a woman, whereas the newer generation sees her appeal. It is important to point out that, whereas in a gay man's world, being attractive is an undeniable asset, for women it's often a source of mistreatment and objectification, as described by S. (trans masc, 34), while recalling past experiences before transitioning.

Secondly, physical appearance came up -this time primarily by women- as an **identifier**, a visual cue of non-heterosexuality for other women to pick up. Both R. (queer woman, 33) and E. (lesbian, 29) have felt pressured to look more masculine, mentioning features such as a shaved head, tattoos, lack of make-up, clothes usually fashioned by men (E. jokingly mentions the "lesbian shirts"), even a less feminine body shape. R. mentions the need for not only masculine, but **"bold"** elements, a sentiment shared by K. (genderfluid, 25) who believes their identity would be more accepted if paired with a more **"extreme"** and less "conventional / mainstream" look. T. (gay, 29) also feels that his simplistic look renders him out of place in LGBTQ+ spaces, while H. (bisexual woman, 31) hypothesizes that her look is too neutral for lesbian women to recognize and approach her. E. (lesbian, 29) considers this phenomenon a remnant of a bygone era when members of the community needed to look extravagant for other members to easily recognize them; an outdated necessity that she vehemently refuses to adhere to.

> "I really dig women who keep their femininity intact within a community that imposes that, to be strong, they have to look like men [...] You have the right to be a bimbo and still be a freaking lesbian! [...] I will wear make-up, I will wear my lipstick, and, if I want to, I will wear heels too! I will be who I am and I will dress as I damn please!"

Thirdly, beyond an identifier of orientation, appearance is also perceived to signal a specific role. According to A. (gay, 35), D. (gay, 32), E. (lesbian, 29) and I. (lesbian, 28), a more masculine appearance leads to the assumption of a dominant role, whereas a more feminine image is associated with a submissive one. All 4 agree that these assumptions are, more often than not, mistaken and, in any case, restrictive, leading individuals to get pigeonholed. D. laments that his rugged appearance leads other gay men to assume he is a "top", only to get visibly disappointed when he reveals he is a "bottom".

C) Political Correctness – *You can't say anything these days*

A theme mentioned in nearly every interview, often unprompted, was the pressure put on LGBTQ+ individuals to fully comply with political correctness. Whereas

emphasis on correctness is a widespread phenomenon, it seems to hold special significance within the LGBTQ+ sphere, as it aligns with its purpose to be a safe space and as the community has always been, as A. (lesbian, 42) phrased it, "language-centered".

Seeking the source of political correctness, A. looks back at her generation of LGBTQ+ individuals who pursued higher education in the 2000's and brought a more knowledgeable but also significantly "**stricter**" perspective into the community. S. (trans masc, 34) agrees that higher education was the catalyst that led to a **"queer purism"** and reminisces on the rise of the "**social justice warriors**" to find its beginnings.

> "Political correctness […] was very much needed. To bring to the surface things that we had not reflected on until then. Until a certain point it was unbelievably beneficial […] because it re-evaluated everything, literally. After a certain point, however, it became a device to a new puritanism, I think. You don't speak on these things, you don't speak in that way, you have to behave this way, you have to exist this way. Very, very, very, very specific limits […], a very specific know-how"

A. and S. point out that political correctness cannot be easily followed by all members of the community. S. believes that the need for correctness leaves younger individuals excluded, as they have not yet developed the "academic background" and "linguistic reflexes". Inversely, A. focuses her attention on older individuals, who are expected to adjust to a "new moral compass", which renders their well-established vocabulary and behavior, suddenly, problematic. Previously harmless LGBTQ+ catchphrases, like "What's up love?", now carry an unpermitted intimacy that calls for previous consent. She adds that working class individuals also "don't possess the words" for correctness.

Nevertheless, being correct seems difficult even to individuals of higher academic and social backgrounds. F. (trans fem, 27) stays vigilant in most social settings, as she fears her caustic sense of humor will get her in trouble, that being one of the reasons why most of her friends are straight. R. (queer, 33) shares her experiences in Facebook groups and in queer poetry circles, expressing a strong **"fear"** that if she slips up and says something wrong, she will get fiercely attacked. Similarly, when L. (non-binary, 26) joined a group of polyamorous individuals, he found himself overly reluctant to speak during meetings, as it became clear that there were "**correct opinions**" and unacceptable ones and it was extremely likely that whatever he said would be perceived as offensive to another member of the group.

Naturally, correctness gets more complicated as the community itself gets more multi-faceted. **Misgendering,** for example, was a behavior unknown until recently but is now a major violation within the community**.** L. (non-binary, 26), R. (queer, 33) and N. (pansexual, 30) have all made that mistake, leading to a judgemental or aggressive response. X. (trans masc, 27), who constantly gets misgendered, seems

more tolerant to slip-ups, so long as he sees honest intentions underneath (hence he has never felt upset by his childhood friend's struggle with his pronouns)

Correctness is an abstract ideal that governs not just word choices but an individual's overall behavior. Similar to the appearance archetype(s) described above, there seems to be an archetype of correctness. A. (lesbian, 42) mentions the **"proper queer individual"**, warning against the "harshness" that it entails for anyone who tries to meet its criteria. She underlines the comme-il-faut etiquette required, a fact corroborated by B. (gay, 30), who drifted apart from his earlier LGBTQ+ friends when he felt they looked down on him openly flirting with other men, scolding him for his lack of subtlety. S. (trans masc, 34) agrees that there is such a standard for queer individuals but considers it unattainable, likening it to the impossible ideal of the "perfect Christian" that lives by the Bible.

The most pressing issue regarding correctness are the consequences for whomever fails to comply; **"Cancelling"** is a predicament that originated on social media but is now happening in real life as well. Any individual who says or does -or is alleged to have said or done- something morally **"problematic"** is immediately ostracized. B. (gay, 30) acknowledges that the community has become more **"punishing"**, much like society at large, while I. (lesbian, 28) believes in accountability as much as she believes in second chances and discussing one's mistakes, instead of **"tossing people away"** like the community often does. T. (gay, 29) wishes he had received this attitude when his roommates called him out for being transphobic, for walking around shirtless in front of a trans roommate who had just had top surgery. L. (non-binary, 26) was baffled when a friend was instantly removed from a group over allegations that he mishandled a break-up with another person from the group, without any chance to share his side. A. (lesbian, 42) and S. (trans masc, 34) have, like L's friend, been cut off over break-ups, with S. in particular describing a "**character assassination"**; one that has left scars to this day, as he has largely withdrawn from the community out of genuine fear and a need for "self-preservation".

Concluding, whereas no participant questioned the need for increased attention in the way we behave, especially granted the vulnerability of many members of the community, all called for more lenience and contextualization. As T. (gay, 29) put it:

> "You [can't] only view it in theory, [that] this is what queer means [and] whoever got it, got it. It requires a three-dimensional rationale and an understanding of the other person's starting point […] Are they poor? What stimuli did they have before they reached you? How much can they understand? You're obviously not going to educate everybody, nor is every queer person obligated to assume that role but […] in order to achieve inclusivity, you have to communicate"

D) Elitism – *You can't sit with us*

> "I felt that I was not at all wanted and that I was not a cool individual […]. I felt that I was being made invisible. I was trying to enter into things, into collectives, where there was a huge elitism. […] There were the top-tier people and then there was us,

> the second-tier, if you will, perpetually wandering around things and, depending on how charming or articulate you might be or [knowledgeable of] the codes… that's how you got in" (A., lesbian, 42)

This quote from my conversation with A. is emblematic of a sentiment, expressed by many participants; being made to feel **uncool**, unseen, unwanted and, consequently, **snubbed**. This sentiment is particularly prevalent in the world of **queer nightlife**, a world of drugs, techno music and strict "exclusivity", as described by T. (gay, 29). I. (lesbian, 28) re-iterates this trifecta, further noting that she only felt included in this world when she was part of the entourage of someone already established in it, but never by herself.

I. cites drag performers as an example of individuals of elevated status in queer nightlife, a claim corroborated by two participants that are or have been drag performers. F. (trans fem, 27) affirms that it is easier for her and other performers to "**establish**" themselves in these spaces using their artistic "**privilege**", while people that are not performers or artists have to put significantly more effort to be "taken seriously" and not be "pushed to the side". F. herself struggles to feel seen when she appears in these spaces out-of-drag, in her regular clothes. She confirms that the elitism perceived by T. and I. does exist in those circles.

> "[There is] a "Mean Girls" vibe. "We, here, are the deities of the queer techno scene, bow down". It does exist. Which I really do not like […] Growing up excluded, when you find a space where you are appreciated, maybe it kind of goes to your head a little. And you say "now I will live out my **Regina George fantasy**" (F., trans fem, 27)

Supporting the "Mean Girls" analogy, S. (trans masc, 34) likens this scene with "**high school**" and expresses shame to have ever been part of it. He goes on to say that the establishment of such an "**elite**" group creates a hierarchy in a community that should be anarchical. M.A. (gay, 32) has also experienced elitism in nightlife and agrees that the elite is made up of people with excluded pasts who begin to mistreat others as soon as they get the smallest amount of authority. F. (trans fem, 27) does add that the "snobbish" behavior of some personas may be **part of an act**, as opposed to a reflection of their true character or any ill intent.

The community's tendency to produce hierarchies based on "coolness" does not stop at nightlife. K. (genderfluid, 25) refers to a general phenomenon of prominent individuals with big entourages and strong community presence having their feelings and needs prioritized. I. (lesbian, 28) recounts her chronic difficulties finding her footing in politicized collectives, which she compares to "**sects**", emphasizing how closed they are to outsiders, with potential new members having to submit a membership request and wait for approval. Much like her nightlife experience, her only way to be included was to be connected to someone that already was (in her case, her roommate), but even then she felt like a "secondary presence". "**Maybe I wasn't cool enough?**", she ponders.

Another prevalent form of elitism in the community is brought on by individuals that present themselves as more informed and more knowledgeable than others. A. (lesbian, 42) brings up the brochures of specific feminist - queer collectives that are indecipherable to most people, especially those of lower or no academic backgrounds. T. (gay, 29) concurs that belonging in academia or holding a prestigious job are valuable assets when trying to find one's footing in the community, while L. (non-binary, 26) recalls feeling judged and demeaned in a discussion group of polyamorous individuals:

> "I was afraid to express myself several times […] I felt that I was not so informed […], like my opinion was being judged. Because I saw other people being judged […] I felt that whatever I might say would be evaluated by high-position people, of a high level of knowledge […] "You know what? It would be better if you read this book and then come back to discuss it again"… Like "we are the sages and we have come here for high-level conversation and anything else is irrelevant"

Regardless of what form of "coolness" is used in each instance -status, entourage or knowledge- it undisputedly matters to be cool. So much so, that A. (lesbian, 42) compares the community to a **"stock market"**, where each individual is a product, a "brand", that needs to be sold in a particular way to be in demand.

> "What are we going to do with her? She doesn't know anyone who might be important, she's fat, she's crazy, she's a bit weird, she has nothing to offer me" […] A lot of things in this community have been based on the image that each person builds for themselves and when you have nothing to offer to that image, […], there's no interest to approach you"

A. defines the "cool" individual as the "person you want others to know you are friends with, that increases your stock". Her example of uncool is the "**needy**" individual, who looks to the community for help. In her own experience, her "stocks" increased exponentially when she reached a place of no longer relying on the community for support. She compares this journey to a woman climbing the corporate ladder to become a CEO, underlining how **the community rewards strength and punishes weakness**; that brings forth the unfortunate paradox that the more someone needs to be accepted by the community, the less likely it is that they will be.

E) Toxicity: ***You're toxic, I'm slipping under***

Although, in theory, the LGBTQ+ community aims to be a shelter from the toxicity of the general population, many participants confirmed that it is plagued by its own inner toxicity, which can result more hurtful for LGBTQ+ individuals than any behaviors of their heterosexual environment.

One toxic behavior that came up in interviews, especially with gay men, was **outing**. To be outed is to have your sexuality revealed to others by another person without your consent. D. (gay, 32) recalls how a group of other LGBTQ+ people was persistently trying to "corner" him, even asking other people about him, in order to

"**expose"** his true sexuality. A. (gay, 35) also shared his experience, being outed by a gay colleague in his workplace.

> "I was entirely new to [the city], new at the job, I didn't have friends yet, per se. I hadn't happened to mention the fact that I am homosexual and another colleague, who had been at this job longer […] kept asking me things about my personal life. However, since I didn't feel comfortable in my workplace yet, I avoided answering. I avoided answering without lying. I simply said that I didn't feel comfortable discussing such matters, let's say. And one day he was deliberately discussing with another colleague and told her: "closeted girls are the worst" and looked at me. And I told him: "Are you calling me closeted? Because I am not closeted". And that's how my outing at work happened. Which wasn't very pleasant."

Another toxic behavior brought up by several participants is **gossip.** G. (gay, 26) recounts his experience in two different theatre groups made up of primarily LGBTQ+ members, whose meetings always included negatively charged discussion about the private lives of other members who were not present; leading to G's disappointment and, eventually, his exit. K. (genderfluid, 25) has also experienced such groups or **"cliques"** dissecting other LGBTQ+ individuals' private matters. K. notes the hostility –even marginalization- queer people face after breaking up with another member of the same clique. This accords with the relief F. (trans masc, 27) expresses about dating outside the community, thus avoiding **"mix-ups"**, awkwardness and negativity. She attributes this to the small size of the LGBTQ+ world compared to the general population, the faster "recycling speed" of partners and the constant proximity between queer individuals, as some person of current or past interest is always bound to "be in the same radius, at the same venue, within the same circle", leading to unnecessary drama (e.g. avoiding a specific place in order not to bump into someone).

A. (lesbian, 42) confirms the community's affinity for gossip against other members, while P. (gay, 36) refers to a **"cycle of violence"**, especially between gay men, who, propelled by their own insecurities, often engage in a "**toxic comparison"** process, each accentuating what the other seems to lack, from economic means to a more active sex life, even penis size (a factor also brought up by T.). The goal is to boost one's own self-esteem by making the other man feel like "**trash**".

D. (gay, 32) goes to great detail about his toxic experience with a group of gay men, particularly regarding his choice of partners. Every time he goes out with them and meets someone, the group becomes sharply critical, judging the new acquaintance based on "physical appearance, age, weight" and, most importantly, his level of "**desperation".** If deemed desperate or, in other words, "overly available", the conquest is minimized and both the partner and D. are scrutinized. For that reason, D. recounts intentionally not introducing his boyfriend to that group during his graduation, fearing a visible judgmental reaction concerning their age difference.

Finally, S. (trans masc, 34) sheds light on a collective instance of toxicity within the community; the aftermath of the murder of queer activist and performer Zak Kostopoulos (Zackie Oh). S. expresses strong disappointment in seeing former friends who had abandoned Zak/Zackie while alive, as well as individuals who never even knew Zak/Zackie, capitalize on the incident to gain personal notoriety. "*One of us dies and we turn that into a weapon of personal advancement",* he laments.

F) Labelling: □ *I am not a robot*

G. (gay, 26) recalls the urge of LGBTQ+ groups he has been a part of to instantly label their members. N. (pansexual, 30) has been on the receiving end, remarking on the pressure she feels to explicitly define herself. What these stories –and others that follow- have in common is the emphasis the community places on identity; anyone who wishes to be recognized as a member must identify within a specific sub-group/category -or be willing to squeeze into one. Indeed, A. (gay, 35), K. (genderfluid, 25) and B. (gay, 30) all make reference to being put in "**boxes**", a box signifying an identity that is specific, consistent, distinct and widely accepted by the community as valid.

Many participants agreed to have observed this phenomenon and provided possible root causes. B. (gay, 30) attributed it to society at large paying increased attention to identity and sounded the alarm on how the community, mimicking this tendency, becomes more "**puritanical**" and perpetuates the stereotypes it is otherwise striving against. Another thought is that the community's emphasis on labelling is an effort to establish its "**anti-identity**" compared to heterosexuals. A. (lesbian, 42) remarks that queer individuals often feel compelled to be or do the "**opposite**", no matter the context. T. (gay, 29) agrees that the queer identity over-relies on opposition and, thus, ends up **"rigid"** and "lost". E. (lesbian, 29) mentions "**soldiers**" who give up their freedom in order to ensure that their way of life does not assimilate a heteronormative standard. B. (gay, 30) also sees the emphasis on identity as an emphasis on **otherness,** on having to constantly declare to be **"different"** than someone else.

The issue with this otherness is that it does not stop at distinguishing queer individuals from heterosexuals; rather it permeates the inside of the community. To simply be non-straight no longer suffices. One's identity has to be further delimited. Most participants, however, agreed that an overly defined identity is not beneficial. As A. (gay, 35) phrased it:

> "We divide the boxes to show off our distinctiveness. But that is not the point. The goal should not be to create more boxes, we should be breaking the existing ones"

Whether over-labelling is beneficial is one concern; whether it is even accurate is another. Many believe that an LGBTQ+ identity is fluid by nature and that, by trying to solidify it, one takes away its authenticity. B. (gay, 30) states that he has felt attraction to three women in the past and does not believe that negates his identity

as a gay man. In his own words, by making someone choose a specific identity, *"you force people to lie, to wear a lie and walk around in it".* Corroborating the fact that the queer identity may be inherently fluid is the fact that 6 out of 20 participants have made at least one transition from one LGBTQ+ sub-group to another. C. (non-binary, 24) states that, before settling on their current identity and with the support of their environment, they tried various self-identifications and pronouns, to see how they felt most comfortable. Therefore, it seems vital to allow LGBTQ+ individuals a flexible identity. Otherwise, the community may trap its members in a self-perception that is not true or is no longer true or would not be true if the individual felt free to challenge it.

G) Stance towards the heterosexual population: *Straight ain't great*

Despite this topic not being among those pre-selected to be asked in interviews, the community's relationship with the heterosexual part of society was mentioned in nearly all conversations. Impressively, most of those mentions had a positive connotation with many members clarifying that another person's heterosexual orientation does not automatically render them an **enemy** to the community.

B. (gay, 30), E. (lesbian, 30) and G. (gay, 26) are open to friendships with straight people and do not believe sexuality plays a part in selecting their friend groups, all preferring a cycle that is not exclusively LGBTQ+. H. (bisexual woman, 31) has a predominantly heterosexual environment and feels comfortable discussing her private life with them, while I. (lesbian, 28) mentions feeling safe around a straight male friend, due to a shared belief system. F. (trans fem, 27) recalls how a huge crowd of straight people came from her small town to Athens to support her first drag show, remaining supportive even as the shows have grown progressively more provocative.

Straight friends can even prove to be a **better support system** for LGBTQ+ individuals despite not fully relating to their issues. X. (trans masc, 27) brings out the contrast between the many disappointments he has experienced in interactions with queer individuals, on the one hand, and the honest effort of a cisgender heterosexual childhood friend to support him during his transition. D. (gay 32) feels more comfortable around his straight friends, as does R. (queer, 33), who says her straight friends find it easier to accept her queer identity without second guessing. S. (trans masc, 34) concurs, stating the following regarding his current friend group:

> "[It is] paradoxically [comprised] of the old cis friends from childhood who stuck around back then, after the lesbian turn, who may not comprehend certain things but they go straight to acceptance without comprehending. And they don't have all the queer toxicity and purism. And this is something we have discussed with other [trans] people; isn't it odd that after this entire journey, we end up again with our childhood cishet friends?"

Therefore, as derived from many of the interviews, the intense polarization between straight people and LGBTQ+ individuals may not be needed. Alternatively, it may *no*

longer be needed. The youngest participant, C. (non-binary, 24), paints a harmonious and optimistic picture of her fellow university students being fully accepting and non-critical of one another's sexuality and gender expression, feeling free to appear at the university however they like or walk holding hands with whatever partner they choose. C. predicts that the next generation will be even more liberated and sees people at their early teenage already discussing gender and sexuality openly, perhaps due to the positive influence of TikTok/Discord and the increased LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream media. B. (gay, 30) shares C's belief about the open-mindedness of the younger generation and emphasizes that the fear that led the community to distance and guard itself from the rest of society may be outdated.

> "How certain are we that society is as dangerous as it was in 2010 when we would go out on the street and see notes from Golden Dawn saying "you're next"? Or when you would go out to a straight club, there was a possibility that if you flirted with the wrong person, you would get beaten up? We're not there" (B., gay, 30)

Another interesting aspect of this theme that came up during the two conversations with non-binary individuals is that the distinction between straight and non-straight is now blurred, with many less polarized identities emerging in between. L. (non-binary, 26) mentions positive experiences with "**heteroflexible"** people while C. (non-binary, 24) encounters many bisexual, queer and "**questioning"** students in their university.

Unfortunately, the LGBTQ+ community does not appear to be keeping up with its members' reduced hostility to the heterosexual population and maintains its distance. Several participants touch on the community's **introversion**, often to the point of enclosure. E. (lesbian, 29) discusses LGBTQ+ people's tendency to only hang out among themselves and shutting out everyone else, while N. (pansexual, 30) remarks how closed and restricted the community is in Greece compared to other countries where she has lived. R. (queer, 33) agrees and worries that, by excluding other people, queer individuals also sacrifice their other identities and end up viewing life solely though the "rainbow lens".

This introversion may manifest in active exclusion of heterosexual people. Both N. (pansexual, 30) and D. (gay, 32) recall being denied entry to an LGBTQ+ club because their group included straight people. M.A. (gay, 32) considers this a **"**cycle of violence**"**, the community's "**pay-back**" for the years of segregation they have faced, and suspects that some of the more influential people within the community stand to profit from this tension. R. (queer, 33) shares her girlfriend's negative experience in the Athens Lesbian Fest, where she was side-eyed for bringing along a straight friend, while B. (gay, 30) rejects the concept of LGBTQ+ spaces altogether and believes society is now ready for a merge. F. (trans fem, 27) highlights that heterosexual people are not only excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces but also from LGBTQ+ causes and activism, which she considers particularly counterproductive. M.A. (gay, 32) even wishes for more heterosexual presence in the Pride parade.

The community harbors hostility not only for heterosexual individuals but for all **behaviors regarded as heteronormative**. For E. (lesbian, 29), one such behavior is liking ballet. For A. (gay, 35), it is writing "next door guy" on his dating profile. For A. (lesbian, 42), it is her desire to be in a monogamous relationship. For R. (queer, 33), it is her wish to have a child with her partner; a wish that, once expressed, alienated a lot of her lesbian friends. For S. (trans masc, 34) it is the fact that he already has a child; raising eyebrows among queer activists who saw her parenthood as proof of a heterosexual lifestyle or, even, as a **privilege**.

Indeed, any element of an LGBTQ+ person's life, behavior or appearance that can be read as heteronormative is often deemed a privilege that keeps them from truly understanding the queer experience. S. (trans masc, 34) speaks of an inversion; whatever is an advantage in the hetero world is an instant flaw in the queer world and whatever is dismissed by the heterosexual part of society becomes an ultimate badge of honor for queer individuals. In that sense, the community has devised what he calls the "**queer-o-meter"**, according to which the more under-privileged an individual is measured to be, the more the community embraces them. This has, according to him, led to many presenting a distorted background to falsely appear less privileged. A. (lesbian, 42) and R. (queer, 33) agree that there is such a measuring tactic, the latter stating the following on being made to feel **not queer "enough"**

> "Are you worthy of our acceptance? Or are you not lesbian enough? Are you not poor enough? Are you not abused enough? Are you not excluded enough from society? Do you not have enough traumas?"

Th. (bisexual woman, 31) connects this measurement of queerness to bi-erasure, as she claims that bisexual people are often perceived to be safer and more socially integrated because they can form acceptable heterosexual relationships. She argues, however, that this perception omits crucial aspects of her experience, such as having to lie to her parents about her first female partner; an experience that clearly separates her from straight people.

It is worth noting that many of the participants can justify the community's guarded and reluctant stance towards the heterosexual part of society. K. (genderfluid, 25) and I. (lesbian, 28) emphasize the importance of a **"safe space"**, whereas L. (non-binary, 26), despite having wished for more mingling with straight people, does acknowledge that their lack of awareness on community-specific matters can at times be "tiring". What may need to be evaluated better is the extent to which some of the walls must come down, to ensure the safety of queer individuals without fully isolating them. M.A. (gay, 32) believes this separation perpetuates marginalization, while E. (lesbian, 29) believes it's worth remembering that the community has been aided throughout its history by heterosexual allies. Citing the 2014 film "Pride", she underlines that progress is better achieved by various groups uniting for a common cause.

> "Segregation is not what has moved the community forward. It was that we united with other people. We united with the feminists [many of whom] were straight at the end of the day. We united with other categories of people who had also experienced certain things and understood our experience. We should not be separating ourselves [...] We should not be closing ourselves up" (E., lesbian, 29)

Discussion

The findings, organized in these seven principal themes, corroborate past research as well as the expectations of this research: the LGBTQ+ community is in a state of disintegration. However, as many participants pointed out, that is to be expected, due to the abstract and complex nature of the very constructs that are meant to bind the community together; gender and sexuality.

The LGBTQ+ community has undertaken the impossible task of uniting many different sub-groups under one common umbrella, despite each group having different experiences and often clashing goals (Younes, 2021). Widespread sexism makes it difficult for the men and the women of the community to feel like allies, while individuals outside of the gender binary may feel disconnected and misunderstood by both. Even inside each sub-group, absolute cohesion can never be achieved. That is especially true for the trans group, not only because of the inherent gender differences (trans masc vs. trans fem vs. trans non-binary individuals), but also due to the complexities connected with transition (trans medicalists vs. trans non-medicalists, as S. mentioned during our interview).

Further complicating the matter, gender and sexuality are not the only identities of any individual. Race, social status, income, profession, political beliefs, educational background and physical and mental health, among others, cut across the community, splitting the existing sub-groups into even smaller sub-groups. Therefore, the community is made up of many different individuals and even the aspects that supposedly connect them (their opposition to heteronormativity and the patriarchal social structure, as C. and I. stated) affect each of them in different ways and to different extents.

It has been theorized that the fundamental factor that led to the formation of the community was danger; the need to unite and assert the rights of individuals that were being persecuted and ostracized (Morris, 2023). As A. (gay, 35) words it, these are individuals that were "born wronged" and the mission of addressing this inherent injustice is the glue that keeps the community together. By this logic, as social progress is being gradually achieved, the community may no longer serve a purpose.

Nevertheless, all participants, even the most disenchanted ones, expressed a deeper connection with the community –or the idea of one- despite its shortcomings and inner disputes.

- Th. (bisexual woman, 31), upon discovering her attraction to women, felt a deep-rooted urge to join a community made up of people that were "different" in the same way she was.
- A similar urge was expressed by C. (non-binary, 24), who entered into university in anticipation of finding queer individuals, and credits those connections for their current acceptance of their identity, as well as H. (bisexual woman, 31) who is still in anticipation of finding an LGBTQ+ circle and was immediately excited to be interviewed as she considered that a form of connection to the community.
- K. (genderfluid, 25) yearns to "go back to the queers!" after some disappointing interactions with straight acquaintances.
- I. (lesbian, 28) mentions an "illicit understanding" between LGBTQ+ people, a feeling of "safety, connection, familiarity and trust", while also crediting the community (and particularly gay men's love for make-up!) for how she has embraced her own femininity.
- R. (queer, 33) and F. (trans fem, 27) also praise the special depth of their conversations with other LGBTQ+ individuals compared to straight friends.
- Both M.A. (gay, 32) and P. (gay, 36) believe that the community has helped them become more tolerant to people that look and behave differently from them, with the latter also finding a point of connection in LGBTQ+ individuals' often tumultuous relationship with their parents.

Furthermore, it is telling that participants tended to defend the community, suggesting justifications and extenuations for some of its flaws, including ones they had pointed out themselves. In fact, 92 quotes were found among all 20 interviews where the interviewee attributed a negative trait or behavior of the community to collective trauma, turbulent upbringing, history of rejection or the widespread disarray affecting society at large, among other factors. None of the seven themes analyzed above was left fully unjustified.

- Contested identity: H. (bisexual woman, 31) understands that bi-erasure –and the perception that bisexuality is a "safe" middle ground- stems from the abuse that gay men and lesbians have suffered due to their sexuality
- Physical appearance: P. (gay, 35) believes that gay men's cruelty in this matter reflects –and reproduces- the rejection they have received from heterosexual people.
- Political correctness: R. (queer, 33) accepts that the over-vigilance around correctness and the ensuing aggressiveness that alienates her may in fact be reasonable measures of self-protection by individuals who have dealt with more abuse than she has

- Elitism: F. (trans fem, 27) explains that elitist behaviors might be coming from people who are still adjusting to finally finding an environment that values them.
- Toxicity: A. (gay, 35) partly diffuses his frustration for his own outing by viewing it as a manifestation of bitterness from an individual who has been dealing with adversity his entire life.
- Labelling: B. (gay, 30), while vehemently opposed to labels, recognizes that they helped many marginalized and overlooked groups find their voice and enter the dialogue
- Stance towards the heterosexual population: I. (lesbian, 28) affirms that the community's introversion is a result of reasonable suspicion, caused by chronic abuse by the rest of society.

And, finally, A. (lesbian, 42) partly justifies all the above by saying that a number of the community's flawed dynamics stem from queer people's strenuous effort to appear stronger.

> "When you are vulnerable and you want to be strong, I feel that ultimately you disown [...] a feeling which can create a lot of kindness [...] I would like for us to speak in different terms, more humane, terms of greater compassion [...] To stop time for a moment and remember what we have forgotten; to assume the responsibility to not reproduce the cruelty" (A., lesbian, 42)

There is a case to be made that this paper itself, despite putting the spotlight on the community's disputes and cracks, also serves as proof of its enduring significance. In a 2017 Huffington Post article, entitled "The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness", John Pachankis, a stress researcher at Yale, attributes the increased stress experienced by gay and bisexual men to the harsh rejection of various kinds that they receive from other gay and bisexual men and to the fact that this rejection simply hurts more. It is easier for people to absorb rejection from individuals that they already consider different. But when rejection comes from someone we consider our own, it leaves a mark. In that sense, the volume of material collected and analyzed, in this and other papers, regarding the issues of the community, shows not only our valid disappointment from a group that we expect more from, but also an illicit hope and desire to come together and fix it. In that sense, the findings of this research may be seen, not as reproaches towards the community, but rather as pointers for its improvement and future prosperity.

Limitations

Since participation in this research was fully voluntary and since all potential participants were informed in detail about the topic, this research could not reach three significant groups; a) individuals that feel fully integrated in the community and therefore would not be interested in an interview about non-belonging, b)

individuals so alienated from the community that they would not enter any discussion about it and c) closeted people, who may not have been comfortable participating, but who may have valuable input on how the community looks from the outside and how it may be impacting, positively or negatively, their reluctance to come out.

Reflexivity

It is important to acknowledge that I am a gay man who does not feel included or recognized by the community, hence the choice of the topic. Although much effort went into ensuring neutrality and although all questions stemmed from the respective bibliography, it is likely that my personal connection to the topic affected my approach, the selection of the participants, the flow of our conversations and the aspects that were emphasized more during each interview.

Future research

Many themes that arose during this research lend themselves to further and more direct examination. The possible alienation of individuals with a less advanced educational background, the personal impact of being cancelled by the community, the queer-o-meter and the relationships of bisexual and non-binary individuals with homo/heterosexual and gender binary individuals, respectively, would all benefit from a closer look in the future.

Moreover, it is important to note that most of the participants were millennials. However, many of them mentioned Gen Z, with B., S. and T. in particular praising younger individuals for not succumbing to the shortcomings of millennial queer people and expressing optimism that a new, more fluid and more open-minded community is emerging. C. (non-binary, 24) largely confirmed these promising descriptions. It would therefore be interesting for a future research to examine Gen Z individuals in their 30's, to verify if the promise of an improved community was fulfilled, what they did differently, how they feel towards the community and what issues continue to concern them.

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