

A LOOK FROM THE INSIDE: THE IMAGE OF LGBTQI+ COMMUNITIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS MEMBERS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The present study proposes an affirmative, constructivist and inclusive approach to how people who identify themselves as sexual and gender minorities (SGM) in Romania perceive their community and how they occupy and feel its space. I also try to focus on how SGM perceive their physical/online/imagined spaces, in a subjective geography, how they constructed it, and the manner they relate to the concept of community. The research is quantitative, exploratory, transversal, and uses the questionnaire as a research tool. Regarding the participants in this study, I tried to represent all the letters under the LGBTQI+ umbrella, with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, ages from 18 to 56 years old, and from all over Romania. After the Corona Virus Pandemic and with the ascension of far right-wing parties, those who took part in this study had a harsh perspective on the LGBTQI+ communities, but also a greater need for connection and understanding from their peers. I find it important to speak nearby, instead of speaking for, so the communities are presenting their realities, qualities, and flaws.

Keywords: Community; LGBTQI+; identity; belonging.

Résumé

La présente étude propose une approche affirmative, constructiviste et inclusive de la façon dont les personnes qui s'identifient comme minorités sexuelles et de genre (MSG) en Roumanie perçoivent leur communauté et comment elles occupent et ressentent l'espace. J'essaie également de me concentrer sur la façon dont SGM perçoit leurs espaces physiques/en ligne/imaginaires, dans une géographie subjective, comment ils l'ont construit et la manière dont ils se rapportent au concept de communauté. La recherche est quantitative, exploratoire, transversale et utilise le questionnaire comme outil de recherche. En ce qui concerne les participants à cette étude, j'ai essayé de représenter toutes les lettres sous l'égide LGBTQI+, avec diverses identités de genre et orientations sexuelles, âgées de 18 à 56 ans, et de toute la Roumanie. Après la pandémie de Coronavirus et avec l'ascension des partis d'extrême droite, ceux qui ont participé à cette étude avaient un point de vue sévère de leurs communautés, mais aussi un plus grand besoin de connexion et de compréhension de la part de leurs pairs. Je trouve ça important de parler à proximité, au

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lieu de parler pour, afin que les communautés présentent leurs réalités, leurs qualités et leurs défauts.

Mots clés: Communauté ; LGBTQI+ ; identité ; l' appartenance.

Rezumat

Prezentul studiu își propune o abordare afirmativă, constructivistă și incluzivă a modului în care persoanele care se identifică ca minorități sexuale și de gen (MSG) din România își percep comunitatea și modul în care ocupă și simt spațiul acesteia. De asemenea, încerc să mă concentrez asupra modului în care MSG își percep spațiile fizice/online/imaginate, într-o geografie subiectivă, cum îl construiesc și cum se raportează la conceptul de comunitate. Cercetarea este cantitativă, exploratorie, transversală și folosește chestionarul ca instrument de cercetare. În ceea ce privește participanții la acest studiu, am încercat să reprezint toate literele sub umbrela LGBTQI+, cu identități de gen și orientări sexuale diverse, cu vârste cuprinse între 18 și 56 de ani, și din toată România. După pandemia de coronavirus și odată cu ascensiunea partidelor de extremă dreaptă, persoanele LGBTQI+ care au participat la studiu, au lansat un discurs în mare parte negativ la adresa comunităților, dar în același timp se resimte în răspunsuri și o nevoie mai mare de conectare și înțelegere din partea celorlalți membri. Nu în cele din urmă, consider important să vorbim în apropiere, în loc de a vorbi pentru, astfel încât comunitățile să aibă spațiul de a își prezenta singure și din interior realitățile, calitățile și defectele cu care se confruntă.

Cuvinte cheie: Comunitate; LGBTQI+; identitate; apartenență.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, society viewed sexual and gender minorities (SGM) in different ways, depending on the customs of the time and space. And as history repeats itself, we are currently dealing with an increase in the popularity of national and far right-wing parties that campaign against reproductive rights and LGBTQI+ people (*Revival* in Bulgaria, *Fidesz* in Hungary, *United Right Alliance* in Poland, *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* in Romania).

In today's Romania, the Pandemic, its aftermath, and the increase in the voices of far right-wing parties among neighboring countries put pressure on MSG and their rights (Ghiorghe, 2022).

At the same time, in the latest *Eurobarometer on discrimination in Europe* (2019), sexual minorities are among the most discriminated categories in Romania; thus, 40 percent of Romanians would feel totally „uncomfortable” if they worked with a gay, lesbian or bisexual person; 58 percent of Romanians would feel totally „uncomfortable” if they had sons or daughters in a relationship with a person of the same sex. Percentages are decreasing compared to previous years but are above the European average (*Special Eurobarometer 493*, 2019).

Furthermore, the *ILGA - Rainbow Europe report* places Romania in 38th place, out of the 49 states that were analyzed, with a score of only 19.17 percent regarding the legal situation and policies for LGBTQ+ people (ILGA-Europe, 2021).

These attitudes towards sexual minorities determine that people who identify as such do not publicly assume their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In this context, where LGBTQI+ communities are analyzed from the outside, it is important to have an inside perspective on the attitudes and the image sexual and gender minorities have towards queer communities. And as Trinh T. Minh-ha has said, to speak nearby, and not to just speak for a community which is already marginalized (Chen, 1992).

The concept of the LGBTQ+ community emerged from the need for sexual and gender minorities to appear as a united block in front of the majority so they will be heard when they call for their rights. Today, the term is ambiguous, but the human need for belonging keeps the concept relevant.

Although it is linguistically and politically more comfortable to lump them into a singularity, the LGBTQ+ community represents communities with different experiences and realities. At the same time, I argue that the way SGM relates to the communities they belong to is predominantly symbolic, using Anthony Cohen's concepts. The community is felt through belonging and identification with its common values; it is felt at the mental level, without an obligation of the existence of a common space and through a differentiation from the majority or other groups/communities (Cohen, 1985, pp. 15-17).

Even though there is no need for a physical space to delimit the LGBTQ+ communities, there is a need for it among their members, to create safe spaces for interaction, action, and socialization. I also try to focus on how MSG members perceive these physical/online/imagined spaces, in an intimate geography and in a Goffmanian perspective of how they present themselves and interact in their communities.

A community represents „a group of people” (Pascaru, 2003 apud Mihăilescu, 2000, p. 7), and the *Dictionary of Sociology* coordinated by Cătălin Zamfir and Lazăr Vlăsceanu describes the community as a „social-human entity, whose members are bound together by inhabiting the same territory and by constant and traditional social relations”; the community is authentic, well integrated, and based on shared experiences (Geană, 1998, p. 127).

In the *Oxford University Dictionary of Sociology* coordinated by G. Marshall community implies „a set of particularly made up social relations in which the participants have something in common, usually a shared sense of identity” (2003, p. 160).

According to Lash (1994), individuals are not only placed in a particular community by social forces but also situate themselves within it. Similarly, Cohen (1987) perceives the boundaries between members and non-members as important in creating a sense of belonging – us vs them, those within the community and those outside it (apud Formby, 2017, p. 4).

2. Methods, participants, instruments

The term LGBTQIAPK+ covers under its umbrella 5 unique identities of human sexuality: sexual orientation (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual; Pansexual); gender (Transgender); biological (Intersex); political (Queer; Allies) and sexual preferences (Kink). Also, to recognize that sexuality and gender are fluid, there is

the plus sign (+) to make the term inclusive of all people who do not identify as heterosexual.

As a result of the dissemination of the questionnaire *Feeling of belonging to LGBTQI+ communities and the perception of the queer scene* in Romania* (*spaces, activities, actions, and LGBTQ+ / friendly events) among people who identify as sexual and gender minorities (SGM) and allies, I gathered 233 responses. The data analyzed in this study refer to the image that LGBTQI+ people have about their communities, but also the way they feel they belong through their specific symbols and rituals.

The questionnaire contains three parts, comprising firstly of open-ended questions about how the respondents define the term community in general, queer ones in particular, and about their attitude towards issues in LGBTQI+ communities.

A second part of the questionnaire includes closed questions through which I tried to identify to what extent the subjects meet themselves in the symbols and customs of the communities and if they feel they belong to them. Last but not least, the questionnaire had a socio-demographic part.

Even if my sample is not representative, I tried to include all the important groups: cisgender people, transgender, genderfluid, or non-binary people.

Therefore, regarding the socio-demographic part, 45.1 percent of the people who answered the questionnaire identified themselves as cisgender women, 32.2 percent chose option 3 – cisgender man, and 14.2 percent of the respondents are non-binary people. Also, 4.3 percent of study participants identify as transgender men, 2.1 percent are genderfluid, while 1.7 percent of subjects are transgender women.

Since gender is not binary, but can be represented as a spectrum of identities, there was also the option „Other”, where respondents who did not find themselves in the pre-defined list could choose their own label. Thus, 1.3 percent of respondents identify as agender, 0.8 percent filled in the term demiboy / demiboy transgender, and 0.4 percent demigirl, as well as bigender (0.4 percent).

Regarding the age distribution, most respondents fall into the 18-25 years category, 71.7 percent choosing this range. 19.3 percent of those who participated in completing the questionnaire are between 26 and 30 years old, 4.7 percent ticked the fact that they are between 31 and 35 years old, and 2.6 percent fall into the category of age 36–45 years. There were also 4 people who are over 46 years old (1.3 percent - 46 – 55 years; 0.4 percent in the 56+ age category).

Of course, this implies that older people of the LGBTQI+ communities are not highly represented in this study.

Like gender identity, sexual orientation is fluid and doesn't just fit into a rigid, dichotomous pattern—it's more of a spectrum. For this reason, the question about sexual identity is a multiple-choice, because SGMs are usually comfortable with multiple labels for their sexual orientation, and some terms proposed as default answers are umbrella terms (e.g.: bisexuality). Thus, the answers expressed a great diversity.

Most respondents identified as gay (67 responses), followed by 50 people who identify as bisexual and 39 of them as queer. 36 people resonated with the term lesbian, to which is added another woman who labeled herself as Sapphic, and 30 of the respondents ticked the heterosexual/allied option. 27 of the respondents claimed to be pansexual, 16 were demisexual, and 9 have an asexual orientation. At the same time, there is a single person for each of these identities: polysexual, demisexual - biromantic, undecided, and unlabeled (they didn't label themselves in any way).

Not only the built and imagined space is important but also the physical one. Therefore, respondents filled in their residency according to the region in which they live.

Thus, 40.8 percent of respondents live in the Bucharest - Ilfov Development Region, 14.2 percent are in the North - East Development Region (Bacău, Botoșani, Iași, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui), and 11.2 percent have residence in the South-East Development Region (Brăila, Buzău, Constanța, Galați, Tulcea, Vrancea). 9.4 percent of the respondents live in the South Development Region - Muntenia (Argeș, Călărași, Dâmbovița, Giurgiu, Ialomița, Prahova, Teleorman), a percentage of 7.7 percent of the subjects chose option 6 as their answer - North Development Region – West (Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare, Sălaj), and 6.4 percent live in the Center Development Region (Alba, Brașov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureș, Sibiu). Finally, 4.7 percent of those who finished the questionnaire selected they live in the West Development Region (Arad, Caraș-Severin, Hunedoara, Timiș), 4.3 percent of the subjects live in the South Development Region - West Oltenia (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, Vâlcea), and 1.3 percent chose not to provide this personal information.

Regarding the area of origin, 80.70 percent of those who participated in the study live in the urban area, and 19.30 percent in the rural area.

When we talk about the level of education of the respondents, most of them ticked that the last form of education is that of high school studies, namely 43.30 percent. Also, 31.80 percent of the respondents have completed the undergraduate university cycle, 19.70 percent have completed university master's studies, 2.6 percent of the respondents have as their last completed form of education that of secondary school studies, 1.7 percent have selected the fact that they graduated from post-secondary studies, and 0.9 percent from university doctoral studies.

3. Results

Definitions of what the term community means to the respondents are diverse and aim to both objective and subjective perspectives. Firstly, most responses address objective definitions, such as „Group of individuals who share a set of values, desires, visions” (Respondent 112), followed by those with a subjective description - „Belonging, family, closeness, whole” (Respondent 123), but there were also answers that combine the two attitudes. Thus, Respondent 136 described the community as „ideally a group of „closely connected” people who support each

other. Or a group of people who share common ideas and principles". Only one person chose not to answer this question.

At the same time, the respondents described the community especially based on the human component (members, people that form them), emotional (belonging, safety, support), and finally on the spatial one (place where they live, safe environment).

Community implies both similarity and difference; it is opposing the others, focuses on the people within the community and the boundaries between them (Cohen, 2001, p. 12). Those aspects were identified also in my research, as some of the respondents made it clear in their discourse that there is a distinction between us versus them.

Weeks (1996, p. 72) believes that groups which experience threats are more likely to form a community identity. Thus, behind the experiences of stigma, prejudice, inequality, and oppression, there is a potential that can fuel the need for a stronger community, aspects that I also find in my research.

None of the respondents placed the communities in virtual space when they had to define them.

Most repeatedly, they suggested that a community needs its members to have at least one aspect in common: attitudes, values, principles, histories, characteristics, etc.: „The community represents a group of individuals with similar interests and values, who militate for common ideals” (Respondent 18).

Besides the similarity, the respondents also identified the support element. For them, it is important that members can offer mutual help when needed, both emotionally and materially: „[community is] a larger group, with common experiences, in which members support each other” (Respondent 175).

The feeling of belonging is another component that is the ground of a community. Thus, some respondents pointed out that „active membership in a social group with similar interests and mentalities in which I feel accepted and can relate to similar people” is what defines a community. Also, the term belonging was followed by several respondents to that of closeness.

The space that the subjects talked about is both physical (territorial) and mental - a safe environment where a person can feel comfortable in his or her own skin. Respondents who appealed to emotions when describing the community added words such as family, solidarity, friends, safety, harmony, and acceptance: „Belonging, family, closeness, the whole” (Respondent 122). Accordingly, the community represents not only positive moments but also the possibility of fighting together against negative experiences: „The community is a social group that supports each other, they are part of the same niche and can suffer a similar persecution” (Respondent 3).

The second question from the second part of the survey talked about the way the respondents imagined and perceived their own community. Therefore, the results can be separated by a positive, negative, or neutral attitude. Most people expressed their opinion positively, followed by the negative one and last but not least, by the neutral one.

Therefore, LGBTQI+ communities are translated as safety, respect, freedom, and acceptance: „It represents freedom, non-conformity and ideally it would represent a safe space” (Respondent 191); „Unity, Understanding, Acceptance” (Respondent 104).

Definitions that have a negative perception talk, on one hand, of the existence of toxic people and a very fine line between toxicity and friendship: „In general, a safe space, but there is a fine line between acceptance and toxicity” (Respondent 8), and on the other hand part, the fact that there is no protection of sexual and gender minorities in Romania: „Marginalized and oppressed minorities” (Respondent 130). Other respondents also explained that there is no community term for LGBTQ+ people in our country, but only certain attempts: „I don't think that the one in Romania can really be considered a community, like those in other countries” (Respondent 155).

The people who voiced themselves on a neutral note referred strictly to the composition of communities or to the defining aspects of those.

Analyzing only the answers of people who identify themselves as allies, I could observe the fact that they had only positive attitudes, with 2 exceptions, out of the 30 answers. Thus, if I were to summarize the vision of these respondents regarding the LGBTQI+ community in Romania, I would do it with words like resilience and freedom: „a group of people „who stand for themselves”“ (Respondent 13); „for me, LGBTQ+ communities mean, in short, freedom of expression, the normality of the future (I hope)” (Respondent 210).

Last but not least, when the subjects were asked to identify the biggest problem of LGBTQI+ communities, most of the respondents pointed out that the problem lies outside of them, with members of society, who have hostile and homophobic attitudes and do not want to be educated in this regard. Another problem identified outside the queer communities is the lack of protection from the state and the lack of a legislative framework that would offer LGBTQI+ people equal rights with other citizens: „Constant social stigma, the lack of laws to protect LGBTQI+ people, and the absence of family integration of couples of the same sex” (Respondent 54).

When we look inside, the participants in the questionnaire primarily highlighted the internalized homophobia: „Internalized homophobia because of the toxic collective mentality” (Respondent 70), the lack of involvement of the members of the queer communities: „Lack of community motivation. Far too few people are really actively involved to change something” (Respondent 49), the toxicity and judgment of SGMs on other members: „Discrimination from within the community” (Respondent 34), but also the misunderstandings between the letters that including the LGBTQI+ organizations in the country: „I personally think that there is still a lack of communication and understanding „between letters”, I would like to see greater support for all people in general. And I would like to see more involvement” (Respondent 41).

There were also attitudes that considered the main problem the lack of effective communication between LGBTQI+ people and the rest of society: „Lack

of communication, expression, and organization” (Respondent 140), an unpolished speech of the former: „The main problem seems to me to be the speech that has chances to alienate potential allies of the community” (Respondent 124) and the lack of representation: „Bad marketing. Lack of representatives from all backgrounds, lack of diversity” (Respondent 183).

Regarding the third part of the questionnaire, the respondents had to answer seven questions that evaluate their sense of belonging to the LGBTQI+ communities. Answers are on a Likert scale from 1 - „not at all” - to 9 - „to a very large extent”.

The need and sense of belonging are natural expressions of the human condition. From childhood, we form a certain image about the group/community we want to be in and we create models for ourselves. Belonging to a group/community gives us the feeling of acceptance and recognition and helps us to increase our self-esteem. It offers us a safe space in which we can be authentic.

Thus, when we talk about the feeling of belonging to these communities, 42.5 percent of the respondents placed themselves at the upper end of the scale, 13.7 percent chose point 8, 13.3 percent checked option 7, and 8.2 percent - option 6. 6.9 percent declare themselves neutral regarding this aspect, choosing point 5. Referring to the lower part of the scale, 4.7 percent selected option 4, 3 percent - point 3, 3.4 percent do not consider themselves mostly to be part of LGBTQI+ communities, and 4.3 percent of respondents do not feel they are part of these communities at all, choosing option 1 (Fig. 1).

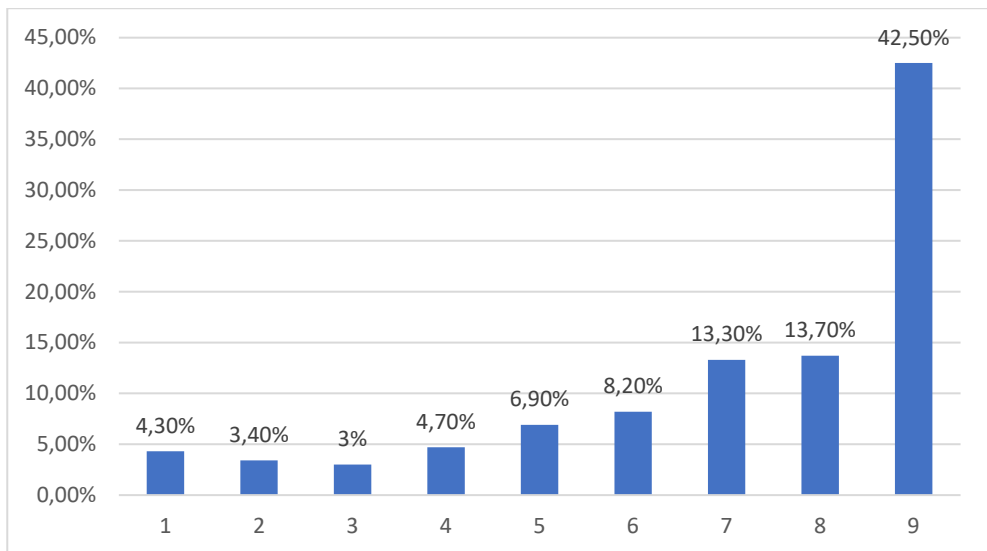


Figure 1. I feel a part of the LGBTQI+ communities

The feeling of acceptance and inclusion in Romania among SGMs was also analyzed in the questionnaire. Thus, 30 percent of the respondents consider themselves very much accepted and included in the country's queer communities.

Equally, 17.2 percent of respondents each chose points 8 and 7 on the scale, and 11.6 percent selected option 6. If we refer to the middle point, a percentage of 9.4 respondents chose it. Regarding the points from 1 to 4, they were selected by 14.6 percent of the respondents, as follows: 4 - 6 percent, 3 - 3 percent, 2 - 1.7 percent, and 3.9 percent do not feel at all included and accepted in the LGBTQI+ communities in Romania.

Among the nine respondents who selected option 1, the majority identify as heterosexual/allies, with the possibility of not feeling accepted by queer people, even if they support SGMs (Fig. 2).

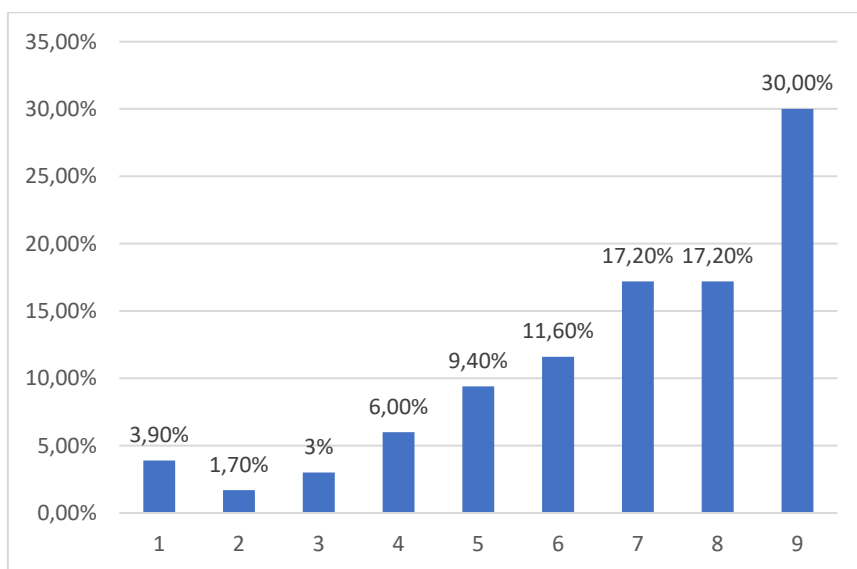


Figure 2. I feel accepted and included in LGBTQI+ communities in the country

For 49.8 percent of those who responded to the questionnaire, the problems of the LGBTQI+ communities are „to a great extent” their problems as well. At the same time, 17.2 percent considered that point 8 on the Likert scale was closest to their opinion, and 10.3 percent resonated with point 7. Option 6 was chosen by 6.9 percent and only 5.6 percent have a neutral attitude towards this aspect. Looking at the lower part of the scale, we can see that, in general, the sexual and gender minorities who answered the survey identify with the problems that emerge in the society and concern queer people and allies. Therefore, 3 percent each chose options 1 and 2, 1.7 percent of respondents chose point 3, and 2.6 percent, option 4 (Fig. 3).

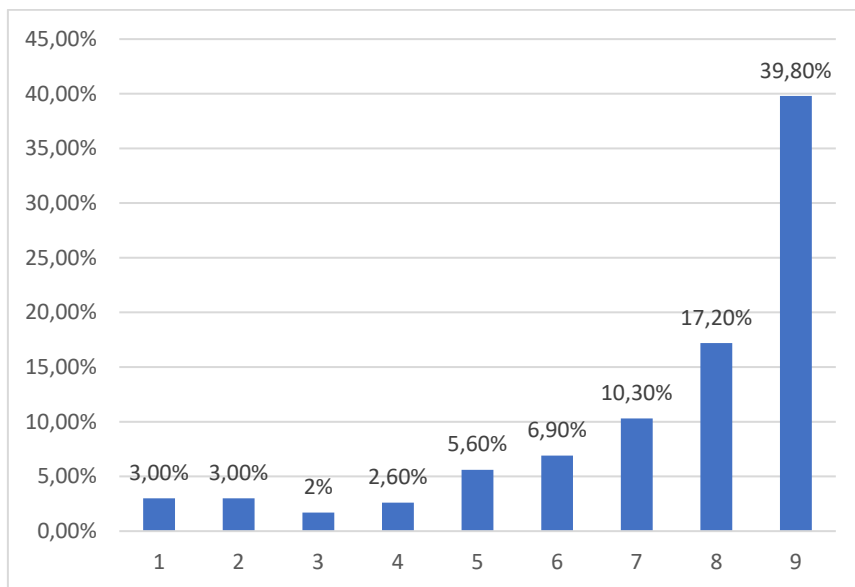


Figure 3: I consider the problems of the LGBTQI+ communities to be my problems too.

The next two questions analyzed the subjects' perception of the difference-similarity dichotomy among the diverse LGBTQI+ communities. Thus, I wanted to identify if the participants in the study consider that the members of the LGBTQI+ communities have similar needs, values, and priorities and if they think that the members of the queer communities do not understand each other.

Therefore, for the first question, the slope is decreasing, with most of the respondents (58.8 percent) supporting the fact that members of the LGBTQI+ communities have „to a very large extent” similar needs, values, and priorities. 12.9 percent of the participants largely agree with the statement, choosing point 8, 12.4 percent of them chose option 7, and 6 percent of the respondents somewhat agree with this, ticking point 6. 4.3 percent of the respondents had a neutral attitude towards this situation, while only 0.9 percent chose option 4. Option 3 was chosen by 2.1 percent, and 1.3 percent of subjects each selected option 1 and 2 (Fig. 4).

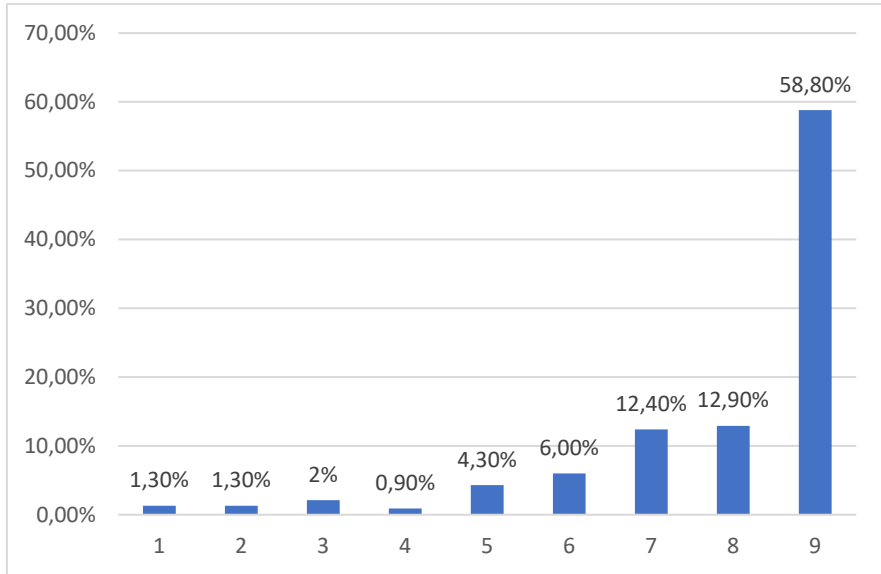


Figure 4. *I believe that members of LGBTQI+ communities have similar needs, values and priorities*

The answers to the second question are similar in percentage. Most participants ticked point 3 on the Likert scale (16.7 percent) - therefore, the subjects disagree to some extent with the statement made, and 14.2 percent were neutral. At the same time, 12.9 percent each of the respondents chose options 7, 6 and 2. 8.6 percent do not agree „at all” with the comment made, 6 percent agree with it to a very large extent, and 3.4 percent chose point 8 (Fig. 5).

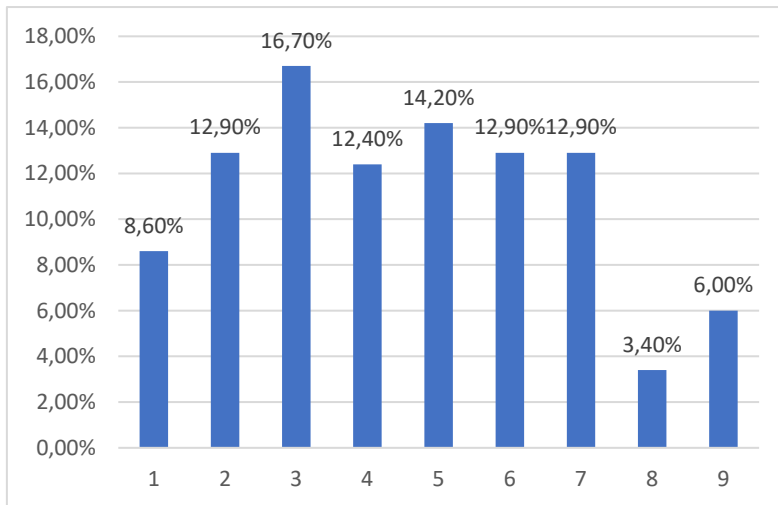


Figure 5. *I believe that members of the LGBTQI+ communities do not get along with each other.*

Regarding the feeling of belonging to the LGBTQI+ communities, 38.6 percent of the respondents considered it to be very much part of their identity, while 11.2 percent set the scale at point 8, and 14.2 percent at point 7. For 7.7 percent of the participants, belonging to queer communities is only to some extent part of their identity, and 5.2 percent have a neutral attitude. 6 percent each of respondents chose option 4, respectively 3, 3 percent chose option 2, and for 8.2 percent belonging to the LGBTQI+ communities do not „at all” represent a part of their identity (Fig. 6).

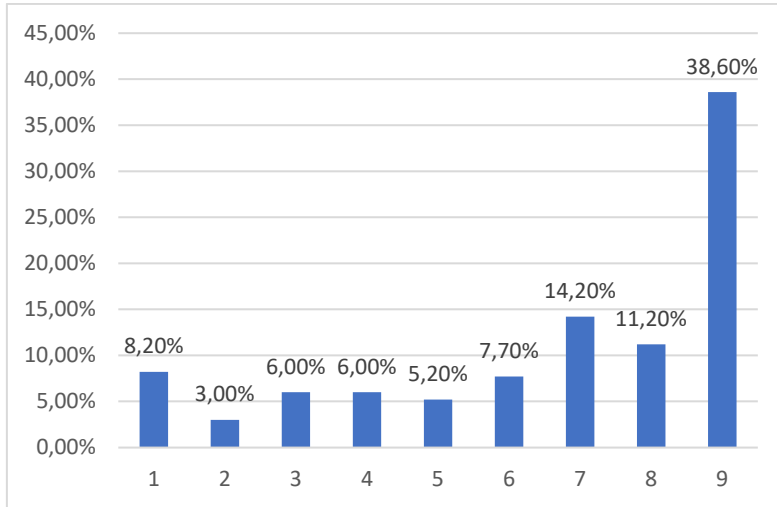


Figure 6. *Belonging to this community is part of my identity*

Considering specific actions and events at the local level, 12.4 percent of respondents strongly agree with the statement that they cover the needs of most queer people, while 6.4 percent of the subjects selected option 8. (Fig. 7).

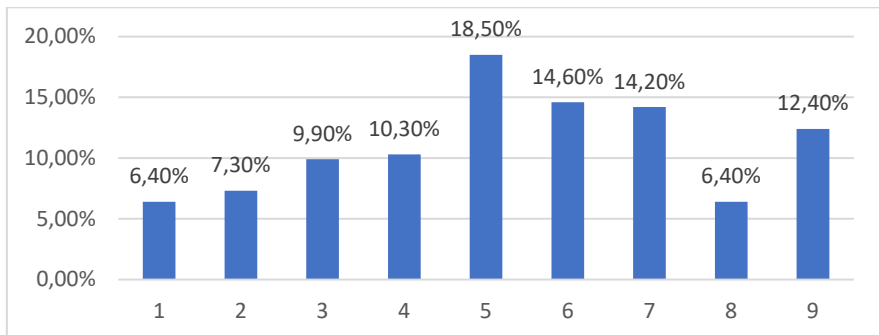


Figure 7. *I believe that the specific events, actions and activities that exist at the local level cover the needs of the majority of LGBTQI+ members.*

14.2 percent checked option 7, and 14.6 percent selected option 6. 18.5 percent of respondents position themselves at point 5 on the Likert scale, and 10.3 percent disagree to some extent with the statement made - option 6. 9.9 percent of respondents believe to a large extent that the events, actions, and activities proposed for sexual and gender minorities do not cover the needs of LGBTQI+ communities, ticking option 3, 7.3 percent chose option 2, and 6.7 percent considered that the needs of local communities are not at all covered by the specific events and actions for queer people.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the members of the queer communities questioned in the current study are ambivalent in their relationship with the community and with the other members. Despite the less positive opinions, there is hope and understanding.

Just like any organism, LGBTQI+ communities have their disputes. They feel united by a sense of belonging to a common goal and in a safe space to feel comfortable with their own person.

Furthermore, the community is especially described as being symbolic and based on the emotions that a person feels when he or she is with those like them.

Considering the problems of the SGMs communities, they can be external, internal, or a combination of the two when there is a lack of communication.

And if we refer to the feeling of belonging, most of the respondents identified with the communities through the feeling of acceptance, assuming the identity and the problems of the queer communities.

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