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Being queer means being political

**A Qualitative study of Queer Activists Lived Experiences and the
Silent Support in Contemporary Poland**

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For the fourth year in a row, Poland continues to rank as the lowest country of the European Union on the yearly report on the legal and political situation of queer people in Europe. With constant negative media portrayal of queer communities and homophobic remarks from politicians, Polish queer individuals become antagonized and stigmatized by the society. This thesis aims to explore the less researched field of queer activism by understanding the lived experiences of queer activists in contemporary Poland. Through the use of previous research and theoretical frameworks of heteronormativity, political power and minority stress, this thesis aims to contribute further to this field of studies. This study involves conducting and analyzing 8 semi-structured interviews with queer activists currently living in Poland. The data will be analyzed using the thematic analysis method and split into four themes in order to gain a deeper understanding of the struggles of the sexual minorities in Poland. In the further part of the analysis the concept of silent support is introduced. The last part of the thesis consists of the conclusion and possible further research.

Keywords: Eastern European studies, Polish studies, Gender Studies, Queer Activism, LGBTQ+ rights

Preface

This work is a collaboration between me and the amazing participants of the study. I would not be able to do this if it wasn't for my contacts interviewed for this work. It's them who work every day to better the experiences of queer individuals in the country, fight for our rights, online and offline, risking their safety and life. Even with their lives filled with activism and fighting, they found time to converse with me and share their inspiring stories. Every day I wish for a better future, a brighter one, a more colorful one - in which everyone can love anyone, no matter their gender.

I dedicate this work to all of the loves of my life - my family, my parents, grandparents, closest friends back in Poland, as well as in Sweden, my chosen family Xiaoxuan and Sara, and my partner. I would not be able to do this without the constant support even in the darkest times.

I want to thank Dymitr and Barbara, lovely workers at the non-profit, who welcomed me in their office on a cloudy March day, sharing their insightful and inspiring stories.

Lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank my supervisor Gabriella Scaramuzzino, who helped me piece this work together, even when the pieces didn't necessarily fit together. Thank you for believing in me!

Szczególne podziękowania dla moich rodziców oraz dziadków, którzy wspierali mnie w najtrudniejszych momentach i zawsze byli dla mnie wsparciem oraz moją ostoją.

Dziękuję,
Patrycja Natołoczna

Patrycja Natołoczna

List of abbreviations

PRL	Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa	Polish People's Republic (1952 – 1989)
RP	Rzeczpospolita Polska	Republic of Poland (1989 – today)
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	Law and Justice
PO	Platforma Obywatelska	Civic Platform
CBOS	Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej	Centre for Public Opinion Research

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1. Introduction

They are trying to convince us that they are people. But they [queer community] are just an ideology. (Duda, 2020)

These are the words spoken by the President Andrzej Duda in 2020 during a speech in Brzeg, Poland, in 2020, in the midst the All-Poland's Women Strikes. Duda has been the President since 2015 and his popularity only seemed to rise, with homophobic remarks in his speech becoming more prevalent and frequent. The constant dehumanization of queer individuals in the country seems to be at an all-time high. Poland continues to rank as one of the lowest countries on the rainbow index, a yearly report presented since 2009 by ILGA-Europe on the legal and political situation of queer people in Europe. With the score of 13 out of 100, in 2022 Poland only ranks higher than Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan, becoming the lowest rated European Union state on the map. As its ranking keeps falling down, from the score of 28 in 2014 (right before the change of the government), to score of 26 in 2015, score of 18 in the years 2016-2019, and even lower from then (ILGA-Europe, 2019) queer activists are fighting for their rights that are taken away from them every day. Despite this, queer activists in Poland have continued to work to challenge the status quo and fight for their rights. While the country's Gross Domestic Product reached an all-time high, human rights are being taken away from its citizens, and minorities are at the front of this fight. 2020 was a year full of tension within the country. On October 22nd the Polish Constitutional Tribunal passes the law restricting abortions, which made it illegal to stop the pregnancy even when the fetus is diagnosed with a birth defect that is untreatable and could injure the pregnant person. (Szczepańska et al., 2022). This law made Poland sit at the top of most strict countries regarding abortion laws in Europe. Because of the Tribunal's decision to pass the law, the All-Poland's Women Strike took their work onto the streets, protesting for days, in hopes of stopping the ruling party from banning abortion. Through similar experiences of

being stripped of their rights, the queer community joined the fight (Winiarczyk-Kossakowska, 2021). The alliance of the feminist movement as well as the queer activists did gain the attention of the media and the politicians, but did not result in any changes in the law as of now. Although in recent years the acceptance of the queer community has significantly increased (Ibid., p. 56; see also: SuperExpress, 2013; Pacewicz, 2017; Ambroziak, 2019), the history remains unchanged and is important to understand when discussing queer issues. The term “queer” has its unique history and using it comes with a great deal of responsibility. In the words of the feminist scholar Judith Butler (2017):

The term “queer” has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation. “Queer” derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. (Butler, 2017, p. 226)

Butler (2017) argues that the term “queer” has originally been used as a slur, as a way to categorize the non-heteronormative individuals as different and lesser than the straight, as abnormal. Nevertheless, years later, queer activists started to seek to change the meaning of the word and, in a way, reappropriate the term’s meaning and change its meaning into something empowering to the community. Butler (2017) argues that identity might be a necessary error – as even through the usage of “queer” in an empowering way, we might fall into the territory of exclusion. In the beginning of the re-claiming of the term, the term’s purpose was to emphasize the inclusiveness that the term “gay” seemed to lack – as it has mostly been used for gay men and lesbian women (Brontsema, 2004).

Knowing the sad history of the term “queer” I still want to argue that there are ways of re-claiming the term by the community. I will not use the term “gay” in this thesis, as I believe, similarly to Brontsema (2004), that it might exclude individuals of different sexual orientations and gender identities. Although in the Polish context

the word “queer” has not yet been as widely accepted as the term LGBT (sometimes also used as LGBTQ+), I chose to use queer, as I fear that using this abbreviation of LGBT might result in exclusion of other sexual and gender identities that do not fit in the frame of the “LGBT” (meaning, anyone who does not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans). In this thesis I seek to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of Polish queer activists, as I want to argue that this topic is not researched enough, and with the political situation and the lack of acceptance of the queer community in the country, it is a theme that needs more attention.

1.1. Purpose and research questions

The aim of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of queer activists in a strong heteronormative institutional context, such as Poland. In this thesis I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the Polish queer activists experience and handle being in the strongly heteronormative context?
2. What types of activism do the Polish queer activists engage in?
3. How do Polish queer activists perceive a sense of safety and security?

1.2. Thesis structure

This thesis is split into five parts that seek to explore the history and current state of queer activism in contemporary Poland. In the first part of the thesis, the previous research, I aim to present the existing literature on activism and the identities of activists, as well as the basics of queer literature on the community, taking a special interest in biological and non-biological bonds such as chosen families. The second part of the work consists of the theoretical frameworks of heteronormativity, political power and minority stress. The next part of the thesis will be dedicated to the methodological background for the study, the background of the Polish language, ethical considerations, as well as the data collecting process journey and data on participants. In the fourth part I seek to examine the previous literature regarding the background of Poland as a country, its religious and political spheres, as well as the history of queer activism starting from the Cold War-era of the Polish People's Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* or *PRL*) until today. The final part of the work focuses on the thematic analysis of the data collected from eight semi-structured interviews with Polish queer activists exploring four overlapping themes. Last but not least, at the end of the analysis, I present the conclusion and propositions for further research.

2. Previous research

In this part of the thesis I seek to present previous research on activism and activist identity, as well as present the previous research within the queer studies field on families, support systems of queer individuals, and passing. There are extensive number of studies within the queer studies research field, therefore I have decided to focus on three themes within this field that were the most prevalent and most relevant to this thesis, families, activism and passing.

2.1. Creating one's identity as an activist – what does it mean to identify as an activist?

Previous research has heavily focused on activism and activist identity, f.e. Bobel (2007) has examined the gap of research between the action of doing activism work (such as taking part in the movement) and self-identifying as an activist. The author argues that, in almost all social movement literature, being an activist becomes a collective identity that is directly linked to the participation in a social movement and/or collective action. Many times, that collective action would include risk that comes with such movements. Bobel (2007, p. 148) does touch upon a different view on this topic as well – going back to MacDonald's (2002) theory that instead of seeing activism as a collective identity based on mobilization, we should see activism is a “shared struggle for personal experience” (Bobel, 2007, p. 148; MacDonald, 2002, p. 125). However, these theories don't necessarily cancel each other – as it is possible to see activism as a collective action and a shared struggle.

According to Stets and Serpe (2013) an identity can be defined as the meanings that individuals provide when thinking about themselves (Stets and Serpe, 2013, p. 41). The author argues that identity is based on the relation of the identity's opposite – f.e. an identity of a husband occurred in relation to the distinction of not being a wife. In this case, the identity of an activist would exist due to the opposite of that

– an identity of a non-activist, a person who does not engage in social movements. As self-categorization comes with relating to the attributes linked to the group and seeing those attributes in one's own identity, many individuals who join social movements might struggle with self-identifying as activists at first (Stets and Serpe, 2013)

One of the cases that Bobel (2007) touches upon is his study of a white women anti-racist social movement. When the women first began their meetings many of them didn't feel the sense of belonging and did not identify as activists, as they felt that they did not do enough activist work in order to identify as one. The author argues that it is possible to engage in activist work, but not identify as an activist:

Thus, doing activism and being activist can, in some cases, be seen as distinct and separate and this distinction is linked to a particular sense of values that shape the definition of activist. (Bobel, 2007, p. 156)

Further, the author argues that the problems that the individuals have with identifying and naming themselves as activists is a symptom of a hierarchal system that the social movements operate within (Ibid., p. 156). In this case, the role of an activist ranks high in the hierarchal system of the social movement – as an activist can be perceived as a self-less, tireless, romanticized individual, therefore the individuals taking part in the social movements might be hesitant to identify as one, as they do not fit the 'perfect standard' of what a perfect activist is (Bobel, 2007, p. 156).

The idea of constant, relentless dedication obviously sets an incredibly high standard, a standard of constancy and commitment that few even self-described activists could satisfy, especially those who do the work of publishing, teaching and other movement work that challenges dominant conceptions of 'in your face' and 'on the street' activism. (Ibid., p. 156)

Due to the expectations of what a ‘perfect’ activist would be, many individuals might not identify as one, as they don’t believe they fit in the idealized view, in a way being an activist can feel too far from their reach and, as the author says, ‘too good’ for them. This led me to become interested in the way queer activism is seen through the eyes of others, which I will go into in the next part, the transnational queer activism.

2.1.1. Transnational queer activism

Queer activism is still seen through a very Western lens within research, as most activist movements and activities that are documented within the academic sphere are from Western (mostly English speaking) countries, such as the US or UK. Knowing that, it is still important to research the non-Western activist spaces, which is what I seek to do in this part. In places such as Uganda, where people in power try to impose the death penalty (later life imprisonment) for being queer, queer activism is not researched enough (Gore, 2019). It wasn’t until 2017 when Ugandan queer activism had gained more coverage in Western media, only due to the cancellation of their Pride festival due to the state’s “*crackdown*” on queerness (Ibid., p. 1). In many cases, in African countries, being queer has been tangled up with the nationalistic discourse, with opinions such as that being queer is being “*un-African*” and that queerness in itself is a “*Western import*” from which African should be protected (Burchardt, 2013, p. 245). Even with many queer activists fighting for their rights and openly breaking the stereotypes, much of the negativity towards queer individuals stays unchanged. The Western coverage on African queer activism remains problematic as well – as African activists proceed to speak up about the negative portrayal of Africa as “*homophobic*” (Ibid.; see also: Awondo et al., 2012).

Similarly, Eastern Europe is often perceived as not as progressive as the West, or it is “*not there yet*” when it comes to queer rights, as Popovici (2020) quotes another activist in their work on queer Romanian and Eastern European activism (p. 51).

According to Marling and Põldsam (2022), because of the lack of acceptance of the queer community in Eastern Europe, many individuals in Estonia have resisted identifying as queer activists. Their activism also tends to differ on other levels compared to the Western queer activism – as Marling and Põldsam (2022) argue that in Estonia many queer individuals choose not to come out as queer openly, as in their culture it is considered normal to not discuss one's sexual orientation in the family or friend circle. In countries such as Russia, where it is extremely dangerous to be openly queer, activists choose to work in secret. In their work on Russian queer activism, researchers Çagatay et al. (2022) shared that they were instructed to encrypt their fieldwork notes as well as interviews when entering and leaving Russia (p. 85). Nevertheless, even with such strict anti-queer laws and the lack of tolerance, Çagatay et al. (2022) argue that Russian queer activism is thriving, with several books on queer rights being published in Russia in recent years.

With the active war in Ukraine, there has been more coverage on transnational queer activism, with an emerging theme of solidarity within the countries (Shevtsova, 2023). During the Ljubljana Pride 2022 the main organization that planned the pride parade has made an exception in the rules of their parade, as usually they did not allow national flags to be used in the Pride, but they have shared that Ukrainian flags were welcome as a sign of solidarity. Similarly to Ljubljana Pride, Warsaw Pride has collaborated with Kyiv Pride on their celebrations (Shevtsova, 2023, p. 10-11). According to Shevtsova (2023), Polish, Slovakian and Hungarian queer activist organizations have worked closely with Ukrainian organizations, especially through providing housing for refugees of the war (p. 11). The overall theme of solidarity within Eastern European queer activists groups is prevalent, with many organizations openly collaborating in their fight for queer rights. This brings me to the next part of the previous research, queer studies research.

2.2. Queer studies research

As this thesis seeks to contribute to the academic field of queer studies, in this part I aim to present findings from previous research done on the queer community, taking an interest in the ways the queer community chooses to express their identity in their daily lives, as well as the research on their biological and non-biological bonds, which will help with understanding their support systems.

2.2.1. The heteronormative view on families vs rainbow families

Most of the queer rights research is written through a Western lens, with most prevalent queer researchers writing through an American (particularly English-speaking) lens. Nevertheless, there are many valuable works coming from non-Western points of view that tend to be overlooked in the gender and queer studies field. International research shows that in many non-Western countries, the traditional view of a family consisting of a man and woman is still prevalent, such as in the Sub-Saharan African research conducted by Nyoni (2020). In their work on queer activism the author argues that the culture within the Sub-Saharan African communities remains traditional and conservative, and the families only accept heterosexual relationships. To be queer is considered to be “*deviation from this [heteronormative] norm*”, therefore it is not tolerated (Nyoni, 2020, p.1). Similarly, Le Cui (2022) argues that the Chinese society also operates in a very traditional and conservative way, with the lack of anti-discriminatory laws regarding queer individuals. Just like in the Polish context, the Chinese family law lacks same-sex marriages or civil unions. Wan (2021) in their work on lesbian coming out stories argue that even in Chinese queer research the notions of family is seen through a heteronormative lens – as they see the families of queer individuals as without a doubt fully heteronormative, and they assume that there is no other queer individuals within the family structure. Within the queer research, there is a term widely used to describe the families of same-sex parental figures or broadly

describing a family where a members identifies as queer, “*rainbow families*” (Mršević, 2020).

Although the theme of same-sex parenthood is very prevalent within the queer studies field, it is still mostly researcher through Western eyes – according to Béres-Deák (2020), in their work on the Hungarian queer families, the lack of non-Western research on queer parenting can be linked to the fact that in the UK and US same-sex parenthood was a possibility much earlier than in the other countries, where often even partnership is still not made legal. Nevertheless, within the Eastern European queer research the topic of families is one of the most researched themes, as the traditional and conservative views on family is still prevalent in the countries, which makes queer parenthood much harder than in the Western countries. Vērdinš and Ozolinš (2020) argue in their research on Latvian queer activism that the terms such as “*traditional family*” and “*traditional values*”, phrases that other and discriminate against the queer community, are often used by politicians and church leaders in the country (p. 258). In their work they argue that the resistance to accepting the queer community within the country is deeply rooted in nationalistic factors. In Latvia, and many other countries within Eastern Europe, to be queer means to be “*radical*” (Ibid., p. 260).

2.2.2. Chosen family

According to previous research, many times because of the backlash from one’s own family, queer individuals are forced to seek familiar and friendship bonds outside of their own biological bonds. As many families can reject their family members for not abiding by their heteronormative norms, queer individuals seek a sense of belonging in different ways. According to Jackson Levin et al. (2020), the act of choosing to construct one’s own community by choice rather than through biological and legal bonds is called **chosen family**. The term within social sciences was first described by Weston (1997), who in their work *Families We Choose* described the importance of close friend relations with queer individuals who have

experiences rejection from their biological families. These relations are often found outside the administrative system and are seen as less than the biological bonds normally found in families. The authors touch upon the legality of these bonds in the same work:

Queer relationships—which are neither grounded in biology nor procreation, and often operate outside the legal domain—cut across these categories, complicating Schneider’s fundamental claim that family ties are reckoned between poles of blood and law. As such, queering kinship obligates critical engagement with “the family’s” traditionally ascribed organization and authority across the social landscape. (Jackson Levin, Kattari, Piellusch and Watson, 2020, p. 2)

Chosen families can be a very positive source of strength within the queer community. Some of the advantages of promoting chosen families was shown in Kim and Feyissa’s (2021) research on queer refugees, where they argued that promoting alternative family systems such as chosen families can be a very valuable source that can help refugees to integrate in the new space and help their mental health. Their study, based on 332 video clips found on the video platform YouTube, shows that the change from blood bonds into non-biological family structures provides a source of strength for the refugees, therefore chosen families should be integrated into the migration and settlement system as a way of helping refugees wellbeing (Ibid., p. 13). An overlapping theme within the chosen families research was the lack of administrative and legal rights for chosen families, especially within the medical field, as well as the migration sphere, as discussed previously. Jackson Levin et al. (2020) argue that a better understanding and inclusivity of chosen families within the legal and medical fields can improve the medical experiences of queer and trans individuals. Although the care of chosen families was found to be mostly operating outside of medical and institutional fields, Jackson Levin et al. (2020) argue that the use of the definitions of the non-biological bonds can result in a much better care for the queer and trans individuals, as they can help medical

professionals understand support systems of their patients on a deeper level, therefore resulting in better care.

Polish society tends to see queer relationships and friendships as purely sexual relations, but Mizielińska (2022) claims that the Polish narrative that queer individuals only form short-lasting relations solely based on sexual desire couldn't be further from the truth – in her study she found that in actuality most of the interviewed same-sex couples already knew that the relationship they wanted to form with their partner would be made to last, even before committing. Even with Mizielińska's input on the chosen families in Poland, there seems to be a visible lack of academic work on this topic within the Eastern European context. That is one of the reasons why I have decided to touch upon this topic in the later part of my work, in the analysis of the semi-qualitative interviews.

2.3. Passing

Another prevalent theme within previous queer studies research is the studies of ways in which queer individuals fight against the heteronormative norms that are put on them in the society. Due to the discrimination that the queer community faces in their daily life on every level, queer individuals might look for ways to either cover up and/or openly express their sexuality. In their article *Mental health of homosexual and bisexual people – role of minority stress* Iniewicz et al. (2012) touch upon a study that found that 85% of queer Polish people have covered their real sexual identity due to the fear of being rejected and/or discriminated, and 59% tends to cover up their sexual identity in every-day life (Iniewicz et al., 2009). Later in the work we learn about 4 ways queer individuals deal with the anxiety linked to the fear of discrimination they can be faced with as queer people (Iniewicz et al., 2012; Meyer, 2003):

1. *Passing* – queer individuals can lead to covering their own identity and act in a way to pass as a heteronormative or straight person to the rest of the society
2. *Covering* – eliminating elements of their non-heteronormative sexual identity that can lead to identifying them as queer
3. *Being implicitly out* – meaning being truthful about their experiences but without using the language that could lead to people finding out they identify as queer
4. *Being explicitly out* – being open about their sexual and gender identity.

An interesting point on the queer presenting identities is brought up by Lingel (2009) in their studies on bisexual passing, which can differ from gay passing. Lingel (2009) uses the term fluidity, referred to bisexual identity, used when bisexual individuals identify as being gay or straight, moving within strict homo- and hetero-normative psychological spectrum. Looking at heterosexuality and homosexuality as two ends of a spectrum can be useful – as it helps to create separate communities of people of the same identity, but in the case of bisexual individuals, if the society looks at sexuality in a homo- and hetero-normative ways, almost dismissing bisexual identities, it leaves bisexual individuals “*centerless and fluid*”, according to Lingel (2009). According to the previous research, passing is not only used in a heteronormative way – to pass as straight – but can also be used in queer communities, when bisexual individuals pass as gay.

Passing, as a concept, is a complicated field of study, as there is no one way to perfectly pass as a queer person. As I touched upon before, according to previous research, bisexual passing can be different from gay or trans passing. I want to take a moment to understand transgender passing, as it is very important in order to fully grasp the differences. Billard (2019) in their work argues that transgender passing in the society implies that transgender individuals “*must appear to a stranger to “look cisgender”*”. Transgender individuals are constantly pushed to pass and look more like what the society deems as cisgender. This leads to many individuals

rejecting the act of passing as a whole – the concept of “*posttranssexualism*” – when trans individuals deliberately choose not to pass. Whether an individual decides to pass or not, there seems to be a lot of negative discourse. Billard (2019) argues that in many cases transgender individuals are deemed “*lesser*” for not passing well enough to the society standards and their bodies become labeled as “*deception*” – as to “*trick*” cisgender individuals into believing that the transgender individual is cisgender.

Hence, according to previous research, both the process of passing and the rejection of passing have a deep impact on the lives on queer individuals. Whether they choose to pass or not, their lives are often subjected to negative discourse, with the added societal pressure to abide by the binary norms that are forced upon them by the heteronormative society. With queer individuals being forced to abide by the binary and heteronormative norms, the individuals often seek a sense of belonging within their own community, where they do not need to perform a certain way or pass at all.

In conclusion, much of previous research seems to be based on American and Western research, without the non-Western lens. This thesis therefore aims to contribute to existing literature by adding the personal activists stories from an Eastern European lens, which can often be overlooked.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Heteronormativity

The main concept used in this thesis is heteronormativity. It can be found in every aspect of one's life – from religion, to education, media and more. In this part I seek to understand this concept and how it affects the queer community at large. Robinson (2016, p. 1) defines heteronormativity as:

Heteronormativity is a hegemonic system of norms, discourses and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all expressions of sexuality.

Heteronormativity refers to the cultural assumption that being of heterosexual orientation is in a way superior and should be considered the norm, making everyone of other identity be expected to conform. According to Robinson (2016), queer theorist Warner (1991) have first defined heteronormativity in order to show the heterosexual privilege in the society that leads to alienating of anyone who does not conform to the norm of being straight. (Robinson, 2016; Warner, 1991). Further, Robinson (2016) argues that heteronormativity should be looked at through an intersectional lens, therefore understanding the links to white supremacy and racialized social formations. In addition to that, heteronormativity does not only judge non-heterosexual individuals, but also marginalizes straight interracial relationships, or single mothers as examples (Robinson, 2016, p. 3). The concepts is so deeply imbedded in the society that we might not even realize – as all societal systems have been set up to only advantage the people who conform to the norms, from the way family life and marriage are organized (Herz and Johansson, 2015). The reaches of heteronormativity can go unnoticed as we are obliged to think in a heteronormative ways since we are small children. In their work Herz and Johansson (2015) argue that heteronormativity in schools is especially prevalent, as

children who appeared as gender non-conforming and/or non-heterosexual are often victims of harassment and violence at the hands of their peers. Later in life heteronormativity is found in almost every aspect of our lives, from friendships, to families, law and societal systems. All of these stressors that are put on individuals who do not conform with the heteronormative norm can lead to increased levels of stress. As a result of the negative stigma around their sexuality, queer individuals tend to be marginalized, which leads to alienation and stigmatization.

The concept of heteronormativity will be used in the analysis of the semi-structured interviews in order to understand the experiences of Polish queer activists who do not fit in the heteronormative world. Heteronormativity within the Polish concept is prevalent, as 67% of Polish people believe that same-sex partners should not be able to express their sexuality openly (CBOS, 2013, see also: Stasińska, 2022). This negative outlook on the queer community can be found in many aspects of life, from the opinions of the public to the administrative side of life – as Poland does not have civil partnership act and does not recognize same-sex families (Mizielńska, Stasińska, 2017). I will go further into the Polish background in the later part of the thesis, the Polish background.

3.2. Political power

Heteronormativity is deeply linked to political power. As heteronormativity is ingrained in all cultural and social institutions, people who do not fit into the “*norm*” of heteronormativity become victims of marginalization. The concept of political power is brought up by scholar Thomas (2004), who argue that we can see the political power through many aspects of our everyday lives, from how much we pay in taxes, what education and health care we benefit from, to things such as the laws that are made in place in our region, such as how fast we can drive or what substances such as drugs are legal to consume. By voting in elections, we give politicians the power of passing laws that will affect us in the future, and if we fail to abide by them, the society holds the power to punish us. According to Thomas

(2004), political power is enforced in every day by forces such as police officers, judges, prison guards and more, who are given the power to change other's lives by their actions within the work they do. Later, Thomas (2004) argues that there are groups that possess less political power than others – particularly the members of the minorities such as ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, the disabled, women and poorer individuals. With that in mind, the concluding argument is that most political power lays in hands of the wealthy, straight, white men. Political power is directly linked to another well-researched term within the queer research field – administrative violence:

The most marginalized trans people experience more extreme vulnerability, in part because more aspects of their lives are directly controlled by legal and administrative systems of domination – prisons, welfare programs, foster care, drug treatment centers, homeless shelters, job training centers – that employ rigid gender binaries. Spade (2015, p. 14)

In his work *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*, Spade (2015) refuses to look at trans and queer oppression as a single issue, instead opting for looking at the issues through an intersectional lens, reminding that characteristics such as being a person of color, being disabled, one's gender, ethnicity and more matter. The author draws on the ways queer individuals experience administrative violence through oppression within housing, education, health care, identity documentation and records, employment, public facilities and more. This concept shows the power that the institutions and politics have over minorities, as they hold the power to change their lives. This work has its limitations though – as it is written in a specific American point of view. Still, I would like to argue that this theory is beneficial to use even in Eastern European aspect, as although the legal and administrative organs of power work are based on different laws, they still use their power to discriminate against the minorities in the countries. As the minorities deal with holding less power, there are certain stressors that are more likely to occur in the lives of the members of minorities than the

majority. Understanding that, I seek to use this concept to gain a deeper understanding of the struggles of the Polish queer community within the system that was not made with them in mind.

3.3. Minority stress

The members of minorities (sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, the disabled, poor, women and more) have certainly been overlooked within research. Minority stress is a theoretical concept first introduced by Meyer (2003) in their work *Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence*. This framework was initially created to get a deeper understanding of the stress processes that queer individuals go through, such as prejudice, rejection, internalized homophobia and negative coping processes that are unique to their experience as members of the queer community.

The minority stress model provides a useful framework for understanding how stressors related to social stigma can lead to adverse mental and physical health outcomes among sexual minority individuals. (Meyer, 2003, p. 675)

Meyer (2003) argues that queer individuals are more likely to be victims of discrimination and microaggressions that can lead to mental and physical health problems and psychological stress that are unique to the queer experiences (see also: Dentato, 2012). This is directly linked to the marginalization and discrimination that are part of the previous theories – heteronormativity and political power – as both theories show that people who do not fit into the heteronormative and privileged world become targets of discrimination. Using these three theoretical frameworks I seek to get a deeper understanding of the Polish queer activism.

4. Methodology

4.1. Introduction to methods used

The methodological part of this thesis will be crucial to understand the process of data collection and later the analysis of the findings. This section of the thesis seeks to provide an insight into the research process and methodology used in this study, as well as the reasoning behind the choosing of the methods and ethical considerations that needed to be reviewed.

This thesis is based on a semi-structured interviews study due to the fragile and vulnerable nature of the topic. I believe that the use of semi-structured interviews in this study was beneficial to the work due to the personal conversations I have had with the interviewees. All of the interviewees come from very different backgrounds and their life stories are all unique and special. I want to treasure this uniqueness and show it in this work, as many times in research those small differences can be overlooked. In the words of Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004, p. 117):

Feminist research has taught us that it is not enough to merely acknowledge the importance of difference. Difference is critical to all aspects of the research process. It is important to incorporate the difference into our views of reality, truth, and knowledge. We must examine the difference that difference makes. Difference matters. (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, 2004, p. 117)

We must acknowledge that the differences in the lived experiences of queer and heterosexual and cisgender people exist and thus it is an important point to note when researching the community. If we do not understand the differences, we will

not be able to get a deep insight into the lived experiences of non-heteronormative individuals.

4.2. Researching your own community – insider research

The act of researching one's own community or social setting has been defined as *insider research* (Greene, 2014). In her work on Qualitative Insider Research Greene quotes Loxley and Seery (2008) who define insider research as researching the members within the same group, who share similarities such as cultural, biological or occupational characteristics (Ibid.). The author argues however that these definitions seem quite vague, as they lack the complexity of the research methods – as the positionality of the researcher can change throughout the project. In the same work the author quotes Chavez (2009), who notes that there is no singular insider research, as the researcher can be a *total insider* (meaning the researcher shares many characteristics of the group and is a part of it) or a *partial insider* (meaning the researcher has detached from the community in one way or another but still shares certain characteristics) (Ibid., p. 2).

Personally, it was important for me to research my own community, as I tend to see many outside researchers approaching queer spaces without understanding the community. I believe that a deeper understanding of the community of insider researchers is valuable in this situation – as the insider researchers lack the judgement and already understand the nuances of queer language, culture and have an already existing context in queer research. To quote Greene (2014):

Unlike outsider researchers, insider researchers are free from the effects of culture shock; they are able to blend into situations without disturbing social settings

Although it is valuable to not judge whether a researcher identifies as queer if it is not obviously stated in their work. One of the differences between the sexual

minorities and other groups who fall under the minority umbrella is the fact that we cannot judge whether someone is queer based solely on appearance or through their actions:

Unlike race or sex or other cultural differences, there are no physical characteristics that separate gay from straight. Sexuality cannot be discerned from one's appearance. (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, 2004, p. 112)

In conclusion, insider research within one's community can be a source of a unique research perspective, as it offers a deeper understanding of the community that outsiders might not be able to reach, which is what I seek to achieve in this study. This brings me to the next sub-chapter of the methodology, sampling of participants.

4.3. Snowball sampling; strengths and limitations of the study

During the process of selection of participants I have used the snow-ball method of sampling. Parker (2020) argues that snowball sampling usually starts with the researcher picking a small group of contacts (*seeds*) who fit the research aim and could be beneficial to the study. After that, the contacts are asked to recommend other people who they believe fit the study subject, therefore building a wider range of contacts. This can go further, as the next contacts recommend other possible participants and so on. This method may use social networks that the researcher already has in the beginning, building on the social network as the study grows. The snowball sampling ends when the desired number of contacts / interviewees is met. There are a lot of advantages of using the snowball method, especially when researching more vulnerable communities such as the queer community I have researched. When a participant is being recommended by a close friend or an acquaintance, they might be more likely to take part in the study, as they feel safer with a researcher who knows their community. This method is a great strength for insider research, as the participants are not intimidated by the researcher and are

more likely to reveal needed information when feeling safe, which was the case in my study. I strongly believe that I was able to create a safe space for the participants, which lead to great discussions which will be analyzed in the later part. Nevertheless, as with any method, there are certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. There is a possibility of bias when finding the interviewees when a researcher starts with their own community and own contacts. Parker (2020) argues that when a researcher uses their own contacts, the study might become overly similar – for example the sample might only be of one gender, one ethnic background or any characteristic that the researcher looks for. To fight against this I have chosen to speak to participants of different genders expressions and backgrounds, but one limitation that I do not believe I fully overcame was the age. As almost all of the participants I have interviewed were younger, finding interviewees of older age was particularly hard. This brings me to the next section, selection of participants, in which I will go further into the inclusion criteria and more.

4.4. Participants

When thinking of the inclusion criteria, I chose to stay very open about the way interviewees identified as queer and activists - as I wanted them to tell me more about their experiences later during the interview. Thanks to the previous research on identifying as activists, I knew that the participants might struggle with self-categorizations as activists. Therefore, I chose to only use two inclusion criteria: that the participants have to identify as queer activists, and that they should currently reside in Poland. The reasoning for the residence in Poland was due to the fact that the experiences of Polish activists outside of Poland are much different from the local experiences. I am interested in researching Polish activists abroad, but bringing this unique perspective into this study would be overwhelming, and it could have changed the data collected. Therefore, for this study, I have decided to interview queer activists who reside in many places in Poland – from small towns to the biggest cities such as Kraków and Wrocław.

For the sake of anonymization of the participants, I have decided to use fake names, all coming from the Slavic language family. I still wanted to make the stories that I will share personal and real – therefore using existing names instead of initials felt like the right choice. I made sure that none of the names overlap with the real identities. Below I have prepared an overview of the important data regarding the participants, such as their pronouns, age and occupation:

Name	Pronouns	Age	Occupation
Sasha	She/her He/him They/them	25	Student
Alex	They/them	24	Student
Zhenya	They/them	25	Graduate student, part-time worker in the educational field
Anton	He/him	23	Employed in the marketing sector, online influencer
Damian	He/him	18	Student
Dymitr	He/him	21	Student, part-time employee of a non-profit
Barbara	She/her	24	Full-time employee in a non-profit
Kaja	She/her	24	Graduate student, part-time volunteer at a non-profit

The participants were informed of the three characteristics that would be used in my research. These three go as follow:

1. Pronouns
2. Age
3. Occupation – work and/or studies

The reasoning behind choosing these three characteristics is to ensure that I can interview participants of different backgrounds and gender identities. Unfortunately, due to the snowball method of sampling, as well as using social media, I was not able to find participants over the age of 25, thus making the age range very small. It was a limitation that I was expecting, as especially in the situation of looking for participants on the internet, and through contacts I have met online, there were not enough older participants.

4.5. Ethical considerations and informed consent

Throughout my time as a Social Work student I have worked closely with ethical considerations regarding qualitative studies. It is even more important to talk about these considerations when using semi-structured interviews, as any work with communities is delicate. The first step was making sure that the participants knew what the study was about and that I will be able to ensure informed consent. According to Arifin (2018, p. 30) obtaining consent should follow these three points:

1. *Consent should be given freely (voluntary), subjects should understand what is being asked of them, and involved persons must be competent to consent*
2. *This means, to participate in a research study, participants need to be adequately informed about the research, comprehend the information and have a power of freedom of choice to allow them to decide whether to participate or decline*

3. *Participant's agreement to participation in this study was obtained only after a thorough explanation of the research process*

I have decided to start looking for participants using my own social network. I have posted an invitation to partake in the study on two platforms – Twitter and Instagram. The invitation went as follow:

My dear Queer community!

I am looking for participants to partake in a interview/discussion on the topic of queer activism in Poland for my Master's thesis written for a Social Studies of Gender programme at Lund University, Sweden. The call would take around 30-40 minutes and will be completely anonymous.

Contact information: Instagram: @natoloczna / pnatoloczna@gmail.com

The post was published in Polish on January 23rd 2023, the text above is my own direct translation. I have received many replies on the same day. When a participant contacted me I have proceeded to explain the details of the study, sending them the in-depth informational letter (see: Appendix 3 and 4), as well as reminded that if they felt uneasy about the study they can withdraw any moment, before, during, or after the study. The informational letter was sent in both English and Polish to ensure understanding. I was transparent about my motivation behind why I have chosen to study the topic – as a queer, Polish woman myself I wanted to understand my own community and see what can be done to support it. That was also a way of showing the participants that I am one of the people from the community and that they can feel safe. I have always given the participants at least 24 hours to read the informational letter and make their decision whether to continue with the study or withdraw.

During the time of selection of participants there were many friends of mine who have reached out recommending their own friends to partake in the study. In this study I have decided to not interview my closest friends, as there would be a certain

bias that comes with interviewing your closest circle, instead opting for using the snowball sampling method and reaching out to the contacts recommended by my close friends.

4.6. Interview process

Before going through with the interviews I have taken the time to memorize and get comfortable with the 5 points that Mason (2017) pointed out in her research on Qualitative Researching:

- 1. Make sense to, or be meaningful to, the interviewees. It makes no sense to start talking in jargonistic intellectual terms for example, just because you are au fait with them. Neither is it necessarily useful to try to 'get down with' your interviewees and be like them – indeed this can be quite irritating or patronising.*
- 2. Be related to your interviewees' circumstances, experiences and so on, based on what you already know about them. It is no good pushing them to talk about issues that are outside their orbit of experience, or expecting them to act as 'witnesses' to events where they do not feel capable or comfortable to do so.*
- 3. Be sensitive to the interviewees, to their needs and rights, in accordance with your ethical position and moral practice.*
- 4. Help the flow of the interview interaction – the 'conversation with a purpose' – rather than impede it. You will need to listen well in order to be able to do this.*
- 5. Ensure an appropriate focus on issues and topics relevant to your research questions.*

(Mason, 2017, p. 124)

The average time of an interviewed ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. Almost all of the interviews took place through Zoom or Instagram video calls, as it was important

for me to reach contacts from all around the country, as the situation of queer individuals might be different depending on the region as well as the population of the cities they reside in. When looking at the map of the LGBT-free zones it is obvious that the queer communities are less accepted in the eastern regions of Poland – the closer to the Ukrainian and Belarusian border the more LGBT-free zones we can find, possibly linking it to the popularity of the Right-wing politicians in the region. Knowing this, it was very important for me to talk to activists from different parts of Poland and that was only possible through online interviewing. Thankfully in the recent years the networks that make it possible to video call have been gaining more popularity, therefore allowing me to access contacts that otherwise would be impossible to meet. There were two interviews that I have conducted in real life, conversations with Dymitr and Barbara. Both of them are employees of a non-profit I have previously attended events of in my region. I was lucky enough to be able to visit Poland during the thesis writing and meet Dymitr and Barbara in their small office. It was great to see that a queer non-profit is operating successfully in a small city of 120,000 people. I will touch more upon their organization in the later part of the work when analyzing the interviews.

Fylan (2005) argues that the important difference between structured and semi-structured interviews is that in the case of semi-structured interviews the conversations that take place will vary between participants, f.e. the researched may have questions that need to be answered but is free to change the wording or order of asked questions. During the interviews I have only used the guide as a rough idea of the themes and questions I want to ask the participants, but I have decided to change the order of questions asked according to the person I have interviewed. During the interviews, I have taken the time to always remind the participants that if any questions would in any way make them uncomfortable, or they would like to not disclose answers, that it was entirely okay for us to skip parts of the interview. At the end of the interviews every participant answered all the questions they felt comfortable sharing their answers to, no matter the order. I would like to argue that in academic work it's important to stay truthful, therefore I have decided to share

the progress of the interview guide that I have prepared for this thesis. In the appendix we can find an edited interview guide, which I have worked on closely with my supervisor of this thesis, edited only to better phrase the questions that were asked and answered. With that in mind, I will proceed to the next section of the methodology, the thematic analysis.

4.7. Thematic analysis

In this thesis I decided to use thematic analysis, described by Kiger and Varpio (2020) as “*a method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns*” (p. 847). When conducting the interviews I kept thinking about possible themes that the interviews will bring. Although every participant’s experiences were vastly different from each other, there were four themes that overlapped:

1. The impact of the political situation on the livelihood of queer activists in Poland
2. Exploration of different forms of queer activism: exploring online, offline, organizational, and individual activism approaches
3. Queer perceptions of the sense of safety and security
4. Support structures of queer activists: biological and non-biological bonds

Using these four themes, I seek to analyze the stories and experiences told by queer activists in order to understand the situation of queer activists in modern day Poland. To provide real experiences I decided to provide many quotes from the interviews, as they will be examples of the raw data that the interviewees presented. In the work on Applied Thematic Analysis researchers Guest et al. (2011) argue that quotes are the main source of evidence supporting researcher’s data:

But, undoubtedly, the most important practice in reporting on qualitative research is providing quotes. Quotes are the primary form of evidence to

support an author's interpretation of the raw data. (Guest, MacQueen, Namey, 2011)

In this thesis, the quotes will be used as a support for my interpretation, but also as a way of showing their real experiences. In this thesis I seek to give the activists a voice, and my analysis will only help that, but it cannot speak for them. Instead, I seek to speak *with* the activists. To truly understand the words spoken to me, and later shared with everyone through this thesis, I decided to research Polish queer language in order to truly understand the voices of the queer community. This brings me to the next sub-chapter, the Polish queer language and process of translation within qualitative research.

4.8. Lost in translation – Polish queer language

In the last part of the methodology, I seek to describe the importance of language within this thesis, as well as within the interviews that will be analyzed in the later part of the work. There were many ethical considerations I have asked myself as a researcher before going into the interview process. Questions such as “*Will I be able to translate this properly?*” and “*How can I best show what my interviewees care about?*” have been constantly on my mind. Similarly to the struggles that Matynia (2003) faced writing about Polish feminism in her work *Provincializing global feminism: The Polish case*, I stand here, asking myself whether I will be able to translate the words of the interviewees to the best of my abilities. As Matynia (2003) quotes Phillips:

the universal discourses of rights are often formed in context, and they often fail to engage adequately with difference.

Phillips, 1991: 149

I have decided to translate the interviews myself as it was important for me as a researcher to represent the interviewees in the truest way possible, as the context of queer language can be easily misinterpreted and mistranslated when not in use by

the translator. As Temple and Young (2004) write in their work on translation in qualitative research:

If researchers see themselves as active in the research process then they have a responsibility for the way that they represent others and their languages. (Temple and Young, 2004, p. 163)

As I have previously stated, I see myself as part of the community I research, therefore I seek to represent the Polish language in the best way I can, taking the time to show the differences in language (such as feminine and masculine way of phrasing, the lack of non-gendered phrases in the language. This brings me to discuss the Polish queer language. There is no one proper way to explain one's gender identity through language. Over the last years we have seen an increase in education of the non-binary and gender fluid spheres of language within English-speaking academia. It is truly saddening to say, but this same research within the Polish sphere is almost non-existent (Hansen and Żótkak, 2022). Although I am writing in the (as Kulpa and Mizielińska would put it) *lingua franca* of academia – English – I believe I must take time to explain the nuances of Polish language when speaking of gender. The Polish language is a heavily gendered tongue – as stated in Hansen and Żótkak's (2022, p. 2) work on gender-neutral language:

Personal pronouns, nouns, and even adjectives and past-tense verbs in Polish require deciding between using a masculine or a feminine version of a word (Hord, 2016, p. 2028)

Since it is such a heavily gendered language, non-binary individuals might find it hard to relate to the words spoken, as there is no non-binary version of gendered words that has been accepted by the whole society. There are words and phrases that non-binary individuals use to mimic the English *they/them*, such as *onu/jenu* or *onol/jeno* (Avris). The most popular online resource educating on the non-binary pronouns as well as word use is the website zaimki.pl < <https://zaimki.pl/> >. On this

website, fully in Polish, the readers can educate themselves on the proper non-binary language within the Polish tongue. Nevertheless, a lot of non-binary individuals in Poland decide to use gendered pronouns and words for themselves, as the non-binary pronoun “*ono*” is traditionally used in the Polish language to describe animals, objects or children (Hansen and Żółtak, 2022).

In Hansen and Żółtak’s work we learn of another aspect of gendered words within the Polish language are gendered noun. In English the phrase “*I am a psychologist*” does not focus on the gender of the person. In Polish the phrase would be gendered:

1. *Jestem psychologiem* – masculine
2. *Jestem psycholożką* – feminine

Non-binary individuals seek to normalize using the gender neutral form of:

3. *Jestem osobą psychologa / Jestem osobą profesji psychologicznej* (directly translated to *I am a psychologist person*)

The gender neutral language is still evolving, but it is a very important part of the queer community – as the people who promote the use of it are non-binary and/or part of the queer minority. Many of the participants I have interviewed were non-binary, therefore I had to truly educate myself on the use of gender neutral language. The Polish background within language and the every day experiences is very important in order to get a deeper understanding of the Polish queer experiences. In the next part of the work I will go into the deeper Polish context of the study, such as the political and religious spheres of the Polish society.

5. Polish context

This part of the thesis includes the background necessary to contextualize the research.

5.1. Polish background

Although Poland has been a part of the European Union since 2004, there are still many differences compared to its Western neighbors, such as the level of homogeneity of the society. Poland has not always been such a drastically homogeneous society, as before the War around 30% of the Polish society consisted of ethnic minorities (mostly of Jewish, Ukrainian and German descent) (Narkowicz, 2018). Fast-forward many years later, according to statistics published by CBOS in 2011, 94,83% of people surveyed consider themselves as only Polish, with 2,26% more considering themselves Polish and one other nationality (CBOS, 2011). Unfortunately the Centre for Public Opinion Research has yet to publish newer data on the ethnic minorities living in Poland, as the data might differ from the one published in 2011 due to the unfortunate situation in its neighboring country, Ukraine. According to the Border Guard Office, from February 24th 2022 until April 2023 approximately 9,104 million people have relocated from Ukraine to Poland (Straż Graniczna, 2023). This increase in refugees does not necessarily equal an influx of permanent citizens, as according to the data published by Polish Economic Institute, 74% of Ukrainian refugees plan to come back to Ukraine, with only 10% refugees planning on staying in Poland, and 16% unsure of their decision yet. Over half of the refugees plan on coming back right after the end of the war (Ibid., p. 5). Another characteristic of the Polish homogeneous nature is the religion. There is no doubt that the Roman Catholic Church is one of the most powerful institutions within Poland and it certainly plays a role in construction of worldviews of the followers (Mach, 2007). In the National Census of 2011, 87,6% of people surveyed consider themselves as part of the Roman Catholic Church. Only 2,4% have stated

that they are not part of any religion (CBOS, 2011). The Centre for Public Opinion Research is yet to release their newest National Census, but we can imagine that the data might not be too different from the one in 2011, as the Church only grows in power. The Church has almost always been a part of the Polish identity, as during the Communist regime period the Church has been a national force, promoting national-Christian traditions (Mach, 2007). According to Eberts (1998), during the communist rule the Church has gained more and more political power as a way to stabilize the unsteady situation within the country. As Poland became independent from the communist regime, the Church remained the highest authority and the most powerful institution (Eberts, 1998). With democratic power came religious power – as now the Church was able to use their power to influence politics on a much bigger scale. During the first partially democratic elections of 1989 the Church has played a huge role, as priests have openly told the Church attendees who they should vote for and the reasonings behind that (Ibid. p. 826). The promotion of certain candidates stays unchanged, as the Catholic Church still is very open about their ties to the Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*).

5.2. Let's get political

This brings us to the modern political sphere of the nation. There are two leading political parties in Poland:

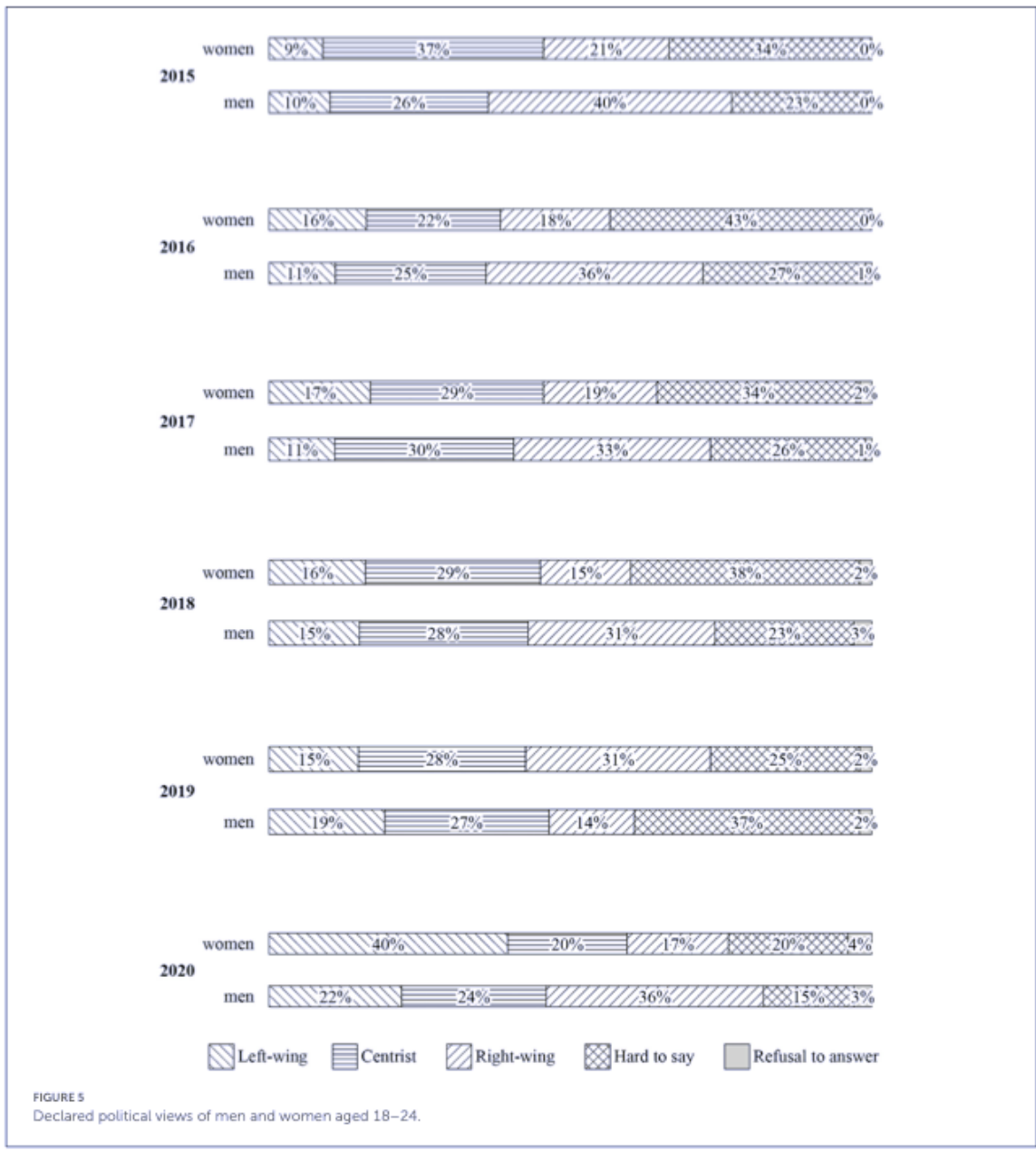
Right wing: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) – Law and Justice

Left wing / Centrist: Platforma Obywatelska (PO) – Civic Platform

With the Law and Justice party winning the 2015 elections, the party and the Church have introduced radically Christian politics right away. In 2016 the party has stated that they are backing up the Church's stand on abortion and will proceed with passing the total ban of abortion (Żuk and Pacześniak, 2023). This has led to many protests starting from Fall of 2016 by feminist activists, but also citizens who have

never protested before. The first wave of protests began in 2016 with the birth of the All-Poland Women's Strike (org. *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*) (Ibid. p. 4). The second wave started in 2020, as the Law and Justice party have won another election, pushing more and more radical politics, such as the ban on abortion. Some of the demands of women leading the All-Poland Women's Strike were (Szczęśniak and Pankowska, 2020):

- Using 10% of the country's budget on healthcare;
- Resignation of Przemysław Czarnek, the minister of education;
- Immediate stop to funding the Church by the state and a real separation of the Church from the state;
- Allowing children from 13 years old to decide whether they want to attend religion classes at schools;
- Abolition of the conscience clause ;
- Abolition of the article 196 of the penal code (an insult to religious feelings);
- Fight for the climate crisis;
- Better Poland for queer individuals



(Zuk and Paczesniak, 2023)

Żuk and Pacześniak (2023) prepared figures regarding the political views of Polish nationals. As we can see, and as they note, the support for the Left-wing political parties have drastically spiked in 2020, which can be directly linked to the protests and dissatisfaction of the public with the current ruling party.

5.2. LGBT-free zones

As the country grows in economic terms, the population steadily increases, one thing stays the same – the position of the Church. In recent years, the Catholic Church and Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*) party have openly described their lack of acceptance of the LGBT community in the country. It was during the 2019 elections that the biggest wave of hate towards the queer communities of Poland has began. There is a certain level of hate and aggression that the Church and the ruling Party use when referencing the LGBT community, as they call it a “*threat*” and “*the LGBT ideology*” (Stanley, 2020). In a way, the Church uses an *us-versus-them* technique of othering anyone who does not fit in their box of what a perfect Polish citizen is. Researcher Korolczuk (2020) argues that the Polish Church uses similar techniques as the Church in the United States in 1970s. The openly homophobic American campaigns of the 1970s such as “*Save the children*” or “*Protect our family from the threat*” seem to find their way into the Polish political sphere (Korolczuk, 2020). One of the most openly homophobic acts of recent years have been the **LGBT-free zones**. The LGBT-free zones were first introduced after the President of the city of Warsaw has signed an anti-LGBT oppression declaration, in which it was stated that the city seeks to help LGBTQ+ individuals through anti-discrimination classes, community-based monitoring of the well-being of the queer individuals, starting a sex-education programme (which at the time was non-existent) and many more points helping the queer community fight against discrimination. A few months after this declaration has been signed, a popular newspaper *Gazeta Polska* has published a magazine with “*LGBT-free zone*” (org. *Strefa Wolna od LGBT*) stickers attached (Bucholc, 2022). After that, many cities have officially started calling themselves LGBT-free zones. The places that these zones were implemented are very important. As researcher Ploszka (2023) stated in their article talking about the zones:

Generally speaking, these resolutions were adopted by units of local governments in south-eastern Poland, a traditionally poor and highly

religious area, where the current governing party traditionally records its high electoral results. (Ploszka, 2023, p. 363)

We can see that the zones were usually put in place in spaces where the support for the ruling party PiS is at its highest. Most of them were also put in place by PiS officials working in these areas (Ploszka, 2023, p. 363). There are many more openly homophobic politicians in the Polish government that are not only in the PiS party. Korolczuk (2020, p. 1) quoted article, Witold Tumanowicz, a politician of the Konfederacja party (an extremely Right-wing party, eng. *The Confederation Liberty and Independence*) who openly stated:

We are going to fight for the separation of LGBT and the state. We are going to pass an anti-LGBT law... to make sure that public spheres are free from provocative symbols and behaviors.

The opinion of Right-wing politicians on the queer community is still heavily negative. From microaggressions, to openly homophobic remarks, to homophobic acts such as the LGBT-free zones, the lives of queer individuals are more and more endangered in the country. The current state of research on queer Polish issues seems to still lack a lot of coverage of these homophobic acts, especially the acts that have been happening in the most recent times.

5.3. History of queer activism in Poland

In order to truly understand the queer activism in the Polish context it's important to look back to the history of queer activism. In this part of the thesis I seek to understand the history of the queer community dating to the Cold War-era of the Polish People's Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* or *PRL*) until today. It's hard to pinpoint when the discussions about queer individuals in Poland have started gaining attention in the history. Unlike the Stonewall Riots in the United States, Poland does not seem to have a specific event, or date, that pinpoints the

start of the fight against oppression. The topic of queer studies within Poland wasn't talked about almost entirely until the dissolution of PRL through changing the Constitution which has officially changed the name of the country to Rzeczpospolita Polska (*RP*) and starting a new chapter free of the ties to the communist regime of the USSR (Szulc. 2016; Weremiuk, 2014).

It would be hard to talk about this topic without the works of Lukasz Szulc (2016), a researcher at the University of Sheffield whose work has strongly focused on the queer issues in the Polish context as well as the intersections of identity, nationalism and transnationalism. In his work *Queer in Poland: Under Construction* Szulc (2016) goes back to the history of queer people in Poland during and after the communist rule. As he mentions, homosexuality has never been a crime in the Polish law system, the only times it was criminalized was during the occupation periods. In his work we learn that during the rule of communists in the country the queer minority has practically remained invisible. Nevertheless, the known queer spaces that have been operating were quickly shut down by the police force, those including cafes, bars and the less-obvious meeting spots in parks and railway stations. The first spike in interest of the government in the queer issues happened in mid-1950s, where the ruling parties and academics started to publish more articles regarding gay men and their secret meeting spaces. The article goes into the known operation '**Hyacinth**', an operation started by the communists in 1985, continuing until 1987, in which gay (as well as allegedly gay) people were made to sign documents stating that they are of homosexual sexuality (Szulc, 2016). The statement went as follows:

'I hereby declare that I, [name and surname], am a homosexual since birth. I had many sexual partners in my life, all of whom were adults. I am not interested in minors'.

Over that period over 11,000 of these papers were signed, although the exact number is only an estimate, as the location of the files is unknown (Ibid.).

After Poland gained its independence, the sexuality becomes more of an open subject due to the lack of censorship that left with the communist regime. After the freeing from the communist regime the first queer organizations could finally register, as in 1990 the queer non-profit Lambda was the first organization to be officially registered (and they are active until today and is the second largest) (Szulc, 2011).

5.4. Queer activism in Poland today

Mizielińska (2022) argues that the independence of Poland marked the first truly seen queer activism. She stresses that there is still no anti-discrimination law against the members of the sexual minorities, as the only law that has been signed by the ruling party is the EU anti-discrimination law that stops the employer from discriminating an employee based on their sexual orientation, and that law was signed in 2004. The author draws on the studies that show that Polish people are less likely to declare involvement in activism even though they participate in community activism. Mizielińska (2022) draws on her previous research in which she found out that only 38% of the respondents to her survey declared their involvement with queer activism. In her most recent article *The limits of choice: Queer parents and stateless children in their search for recognition in Poland* Mizielińska (2022) also argues that often queer families are forced to relocate in order to seek parental rights for both partners, as the adoption of children by same-sex partners is not recognized in Poland. This brings me to transnational activism.

In the article *'Like a bomb in the gasoline station': East–West migration and transnational activism around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer politics in Poland*. Binnie and Klesse (2013) draw on the “*East-West migration*” of queer Polish people forced to migrate due to the ruling party homophobic rule. The study was done over the period of two years (2008-2009) during which 35 activists were interviewed. In the work, the authors find that many crucial activists who were

important to the organizations of queer events and organizations have decided to migrate to different countries, thus becoming transnational activists. The authors define a **transnational activist** as activism that transcends the borders, or is not linked to one specific place, rather combining cultures and learning from them (Ibid.). The main argument is that sexuality is often overlooked as a cause for migration. Although often overlooked, migration of queer Polish activists can help the community back home, as many activist bring back ideas for their activism that they have learned in other countries, such as the case of Robert Biedroń, a Polish politician and queer activist, who learned a lot about activism during his time in the UK. The transnationalism of activism involves travel and *translation of ideas*, which can be a great benefit for the activism in Poland.

The situation of Polish queer immigrants tends to be overlooked in research, as they are usually marked as the Polish immigrants, or the queer immigrants. It is important though to look at their situation through the intersections of their sexual minority status, as well as migrant status. In his work on the measurement of assimilation among Polish gay men in Chicago, Izienicki (2021) interviews a wide range of participants, asking them personal questions regarding their living situations. Few of the men interviewed have married women in order to immigrate to the US, one of them stating that through a straight relationship he might “*remain straight*” (Izienicki, 2021, p. 94). One interviewee also stated that he previously has been in a straight marriage back in Poland during the 1970s, as he believed that that was a thing he had to do to socially fit in in the then-communist country. Izienicki (2021) draws on the similarity of the Polish and American queer history, as the situation of gay men in the US was very similar at the time.

Another reason for queer individuals to migrate is also the issue of same-sex couples’ parental rights when they decide to start a family. In her most recent article *The limits of choice: Queer parents and stateless children in their search for recognition in Poland* Mizielińska (2022) argues that often queer families are forced to relocate in order to seek parental rights for both partners, as the adoption

of children by same-sex partners is not recognized in Poland. Therefore, many queer individuals become migrants not due to economic reasons but through the blatant homophobic laws enforced in the country. As the political situation in Poland becomes much harsher, it seems that it's harder to gain access to academic sources regarding the queer community (especially queer families), and Mizielińska offers a great source of information on this subject.

In her work on Polish queer activism Struzik (2020) presents the main frameworks of queer activism within the Polish context through a study she has conducted between 2012 until 2015 with the queer communities, groups and organizations, with 30 activists to be exact. In her words, the community in the beginning was mostly focused on the exposure of the group to the public and their overall visibility through the promotion of ideas of equality and acceptance. In the recent years the activism slightly changed, as the queer community is more and more likely to get involved with other minorities and promote solidarity. Struzik (2020) argues that the recent shift within the political sphere in Poland to a more right-wing government is one of the main factors as to the negative portrayal of queer activists in the media. In her words, the queer movements in Poland are often portrayed in terms of “*collective actions without unequivocal success*”, in other words it is portrayed as unsuccessful and messy. The author explains two most important concepts of two frames, diversity frame and equality frame. **The diversity frame** promoted individuality and uniqueness of every person regardless of their identity as well as put importance on building safe spaces for self-expression of everyone. This frame has been met with some critique from the activists side, as they re-evaluated their own groups and how they perceive the fight for diversity.

The diversity foreshadowed the emerging frame of solidarity by referring to intersectionality. As I will demonstrate with respect to other frames, intersectionality appears at the margins of each frame, including the next one—equality. (Struzik, 2020, p. 276)

The equality frame was developed at the same time as the diversity frame and in Struzik's words it was developed as a result of "*broad way of thinking about rights in terms of their political dimensions*". The vision of equality dominated the queer movements both in the discussions of the activists as well as through their actions such as pride parades and other events. The equality frame started the conversation around civil partnership (which still is not legal in Poland) as well as same-sex partnership and marriage. Through the development of equality frame a great equality within the movement is being reached, as queer activists have been open supporters of Polish women's protests happening in 2016-2017 supporting the women in their fight for not letting the total abortion ban pass (p. 279).

5.5. Conclusion

Understanding the context of the country can be detrimental to the study – as queer struggles differ based on the location. In countries like Poland, the conversations about same-sex marriage being passed seem like a fantasy to many, as the queer activists are faced with brutal discrimination in their daily lives, such as the LGBT-free zones in the cities they reside in. We can't look at the livelihoods of Polish queer activists the same way we see Western queer activists, as their backgrounds and contexts within which they live differ. As Biber and Yaiser would say, **difference matters.**

I want to note that due to the time constraints this research has been conducted mostly using English language sources. Although I have only used Polish researchers writings on the Polish queer activism, I believe that in the future research it will be valuable for researchers to use Polish language sources. Most of the Polish queer researchers write in English, I am sure that there is a lot more to take into account that has only been published in Polish. Two of the most important queer researchers of Polish academia, Mizielińska and Kulpa (2012), who I have previously wrote about in previous sub-chapter, in their article touch upon a very

important topic of language within academia in order to showcase the important struggles of writing about a non-Western topic within academia:

One of the major issues arising is the almost unquestioned acceptance of English as the lingua franca of the academic knowledge production process, and the problematic notions of "academic quality" and "proper knowledge." (...) What is perplexing to us is the role of the "perfect pitch" of English, when the ability to "write in (ideal) English" becomes not only the tool of communication across dissimilarities, but also becomes the oppressive tool of controlling access to, and distribution of (academic) knowledge. (Kulpa and Mizielńska, 2012, p. 22)

6. Analysis

6.1. Being queer is being political; it's the world that's unfair, and I am just me

The first theme that emerged when analyzing the interviews was the topic of the politics of Poland and how it affected their own queer community and their activism work. In recent years the topic of queer rights and activism became a political issue mostly due to the negative press coming from the ruling party, which I have touched upon in the past chapters. I was fortunate enough to talk to Anton, a trans activist who uses his online platform to share his journey as a trans activist. He has also been asked to speak about his experience on the biggest news channels in Poland. He shared with me that many times the queer experiences and activism turns political:

We live in a country where this topic [queer activism] is purely a political theme, a taboo subject I would say. (Anton)

In the minds of the participants being queer is strongly linked to being political, as when the topic of queer rights comes out in the media it turns political very fast. As one of my main focuses in this work was exploring the effects of the current political sphere on the livelihoods of queer activists, for most interviewees one of the first questions of the interview regarded their views on the political situation right now. Alex replied very passionately, and their views summed up all of the interviewees views:

I'm very annoyed. I'm completely against what is going on right now in the political situation, I don't like the ruling party, and I don't like how they treat queer activists, and queer people in general. In a way, they treat us as a scapegoat, they try to have the whole society turned on us. (Alex)

The participants all seemed to be very angry at the current situation. One recent discriminatory remark from a politician seemed to be important to the interviewees. Three participants touched upon a speech given by a Right-wing politician of the Law and Justice party, Kaczyński. During his speech given in Jastrzębie-Zdrój in November of 2022, the politician openly made hurtful remarks about transgender people, making fun of the fact that trans people can change their gender easily from one day to another (own translation: “*Everyone, in every moment, could say, that up until now, til 17:30, I was a man, but now I am a woman*”) (Newsweek, 2022). The interviewees argued that these statements, not only hurtful, but discriminatory and not based in any research, are just some of the reasons people in the society look at trans activists in a bad light.

Kaczyński directly argues about trans people, and he makes it direct and makes fun of the issue, and well, if he thinks that way, then why other people wouldn't say the same thing? And why wouldn't they, I don't know, not believe the politician? (Zhenya)

Zhenya further explains that the negative view on non-heterosexual individuals in Poland, including the negative statements from politicians, may be linked to the lack of education on the topic, similarly to the situation in Latvia that was showcased in the previous research part of this thesis. In their work on queer activism in Latvia Vērdinš and Ozolinš (2020) argued that the negative discourse on the queer community is often shared by the politicians and church leaders in power, deeply rooted in nationalistic views. In both Zhenya's and Alex's opinion, most education that queer individuals get is from the Internet, as there is no sexual education in school. And if there is sexual education, it is based on heteronormative, Christian and nationalistic views on the matter. Almost all of the interviewees, when asked about the political situation, touched upon the high position of the Church within the country. In Alex's words, the political situation is highly linked to religion, and the issues are a network of connections. I asked the participant to

tell me about their experiences of education on queer issues, based on their experience in school, as well as in university, as they currently study a Master's in Social Sciences. They argue that there is no education on these issues. As their field of research is the use of feminine wording (org. *feminatywy*), they argue that their university lacked any kind of education on the topics of queer issues, even though, in their opinion, it should've been brought up, as they study within the social sciences field. The participant shared that the struggles of trying to normalize using the neutral gender wording has been met with very negative outlook:

In Poland, the neutral gender wording is still looked at critically, and the lack of understanding and the refusal to use it comes with negative stigma.
(Alex)

Alex describes how the use of neutral pronouns in English in Western countries (Canada and the US mostly) is deeply connected to the openness of these regions. In their opinion, Polish people are still lacking the openness that is crucial for normalizing these words in modern language. The lack of openness might lead to the negative views on the language, but also on the community as a whole. One of the participants, Anton, shared that trans bodies and queer bodies become a political issue – suddenly transitioning stops being a personal journey, but a political issue for everyone around them. His own experience as an activist was interesting, as he never decided to be an activist, rather it was expected of him to identify as one:

*It wasn't like "oh, I don't want to be an activist" or "I want to be an activist". I just did my own thing and shared my journey and after some time someone asked me if I consider myself an activist full-time and it really touched me. (...) It touched me because, **it's the world that's unfair, and I am just me.*** (Anton)

Similarly to the way Bobel (2007) argues that many activists might not identify as one, even if they participate in social movements and activist work, Anton didn't

necessarily started self-categorizing himself as an activist by himself. Rather, it was the society that made his experience political and activist in nature, making him self-categorize himself as an activist. His activism does come at a high price, he argues. Many times he feels that everything he does might be judged by the people around him:

I know that if I messed up and did something bad it would be very bad. Everyone would automatically say “oh, those trans people are bad”. (...) We live in a country where our whole lives come to the fact that you have to be an activist and you have to fight for your rights, and your planet, and everything else. (Anton)

Because Poland tends to be very homogenous as we established in the previous part of the work, many times people will not meet a trans person in their own life, only seeing them in the media. Anton shared that he feels judged because of that – as he might be the only trans person they see, and what he does will affect the way the society seems trans and queer community as a whole.

Heck, it does seem like everyone expects me to be so active in protests, always on the street, but sometimes it’s too much even for me. Those times I wonder if calling myself an activist is it. (Kaja)

It can be interpreted that the participant felt a very strong sense of belonging in the activism sphere. Nevertheless, there were many factors that made their experience quite stressful, as they felt that the society was judging them both when participating in activism, and when they did not participate. In the next part of the analysis I seek to dive deeper into the types of activism that the participants engage in.

6.2. In a way, I'm forced to be an activist. Anything I do is in a way activism.

The second theme of the analysis consists of the exploration of different forms of queer activism and the participants beginnings as activists. When I asked the participants about their beginnings as activists, many interviewees shared that their activism didn't necessarily start because of their own will, instead it came naturally. For one of the interviewees, Anton, activism came with his transgender identity:

*I mean, it's hard for me to call it an activism in a sense of... That I talk about my life, about my transition, about anything I feel like talking about, in a life-style way, you know? And the activism part kind of comes with it. **In a way, I'm forced to be an activist, because I'm a transgender person, and I am not the society's standard. And because of that anything I do is in a way activism.** (Anton)*

Here, we can see that, in a way, transgender individuals might feel pressured to consider themselves as activists, due to the pressure from society and the way they are perceived by people.

Most of the interviewees linked their activism with online presence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they shared that at the time it was hard to do in-person activism work. Their online activist work varied, from creating graphics and educational fliers, to posting online (on Instagram and TikTok). One of the interviewees, Barbara, first created graphic designs for a non-profit organization, which she later became a member of. Barbara shared with me that the beginning of her activism was lonely, as her close friends were not interested in joining the protests:

I wanted to join the protests with my university friends, but they weren't necessarily keen on joining. (...) It was during the 2020 Margot protests,

and that was the time, the moment, that I decided, OK, I want to really join now, because the social movement engagement was inside of me. (Barbara)

I was fortunate enough to sit down with Barbara and Dymitr, two employees of a non-profit organization. Barbara shared her experience as a member of the organization as well as showcased the events that they offer:

We create different events all the time, we create a real space for queer people where they can feel safe, where they can meet new people, share their stories. We organize cultural events, to show representation, culture, some workshops and events with queer authors. Other than that, we offer help within the law and psychology sphere. For queer individuals, families, or people who just need the help at the time. We work with 4 psychotherapists and one lawyer. (Barbara)

An interesting point Barbara shared was that the organization seeks to be as inclusive as possible – f.e. through making sure everyone is able to participate in the events, making the entrances to the event venues accessible for disabled individuals and wheelchair users. The organization does not necessarily only create events for queer individuals, as they offer many events for families of queer young adults, or events that seek to bring together queer individuals and the local community of the city. Although their events mostly take place in the capital of their region, they seek to expand to smaller cities in order to share their activism even in places that otherwise might lack the events.

6.2.1. have no will to fight anymore, you don't have the strength, you don't have the energy, then just leave.

Another type of activism that has been brought up in the interviews was transnational activism, which I have touched upon in the earlier part of the work. I was interested to see how the participants look at activists who have relocated, and

whether they ever considered relocating to another country. Many activists shared with me that they have considered moving to another country due to the political or economic situation. One of the interviewees have even lived abroad in England, but decided to come back to Poland, as they believed that relocating countries was only temporary for them. Another interviewees shared that, in a way, living abroad has always been their dream, but it seemed unreachable and they don't believe they would ever actually do that. Damian shared with me that if they were to move, the reason would not be fear:

I always dream about Scotland. (...) I mean, it would be generally better if I moved, and the move would not be because of fear, because I'm not an easily scared person, and I like to fight and learn, and I like the people here, so fear would not be the cause. And sometimes I sit and think "God, it must be so much better there", but I like to share my knowledge. (Damian)

Overall, it seems that many Polish queer activists long to relocate in order to escape the homophobic political regime. As Binnie and Klesse (2013) brought up in their work on transnational activism, one's sexuality tends to be overlooked as a cause of migration, but it is a very real concern. Many activists keep in touch with their friends back home, sharing stories of activism that goes on in the countries they have relocated to, such as Damian's friend, who, as he shared, have shared many stories of his life in England with him.

All of the activists had very positive outlook at activists who have relocated. It seemed that the interviewees looked up to the people who left the country, as they dream of doing the same, but for various reasons decide not to.

But if you, you know, have no will to fight anymore, you don't have the strength, you don't have the energy, then just leave. Do what's best for you. (Zhenya)

Good for them, because I believe Poland is not a good country. Not even just the homophobia, but even how the political sphere is organized, it has influence on the whole country, like how expensive apartments are et cetera. This is just crazy. (Damian)

This thesis seeks to analyze and showcase the experiences of queer activists currently living in Poland. It needs to be noted that for many of the activists the thought of living abroad only started emerging when they have thought about their experiences as queer individuals in Poland. Most of the participants shared that they originally never thought of relocating, but with recent years the thought has become a more constant idea, as they started to feel less safe in their country. But as relocating still seems to be in the area of “*dreams*”, as Zenya puts it, they choose to stay in Poland, even if it comes with certain struggles.

6.3. Creating safe spaces

The third theme of this analysis is the queer perception of the sense of safety and security in the context of queer activism in Poland. When interviewing the participants, I have asked an open question regarding their perception of safety in Poland. I was interested in what the activists think of when they hear the word safety and security. In most cases the activists thought of security in physical ways – experiences of feeling threatened or discriminated against. A reoccurring theme in the interviews was their fear of the police force. Although I have not prepared any questions about the involvement of the police force within the queer community, it seemed like a theme that many interviewees were thinking about when hearing about safety:

During the Pride Parades I often ask myself, is the police here to defend us from the people outside, or to defend people from outside from us? Where, I am 100% sure, at the parade there is not a single person who would attack someone from the outside. (...) I don't know if I'm expected to get attacked from someone from the outside? (Alex)

Alex shared their fear of the police force they felt during the Pride Parade celebrations. In their opinion, their own community was a safe space, where they truly could not imagine anyone attacking anyone else, but it was the police force, the outsider, who they were not completely comfortable with. Similarly, Zhenya confessed that they feel scared of being detained by the police during protests, even though, living in Cracow, the second biggest Polish city, they don't feel as intimidated by the police force as they would in Warsaw:

In Cracow I feel quite safe. (...) During the protests, everyone kind of compared their cities with Warsaw, and how it looked like in Warsaw. In comparison to the Warsaw protests, in Cracow it was very chill (...) only once the police was writing down the names of protestors. But overall, I feel

safe, because what's the worst that they can do? Fuck, write down my name? (Zhenya)

According to KPH (2016) the fear of the police force is quite a common experience in the queer community in Poland. According to their study, only 8,2% of queer individuals who have experienced physical violence due to their sexual identity or orientation have reported the crimes to the police. Only 1,2% of studies individuals who have experiences psychological violence have reported the crimes. Many times the police discredited their experiences, and most individuals believed that the police would not go through with their case and/or they did not believe they would receive appropriate help or support, therefore they did not report it at all. The theories of political power can help us understand this. The participants seem to be intimidated by the police force, who, in this situation, hold the power over them. As Thomas (2004) argues in their work, minority groups possess significantly less political power, and in this case, the queer activists believe that the power lays in the hands of the police, and when being subjected to discrimination they, as queer individuals, do not hold the power to achieve justice, as they might be dismissed.

The second overlapping topic that was brought up when speaking to the participants about the feelings of safety and security was the concept of passing. One of the interviewees, Dymitr, shared that he feels safe recently mostly because of his passing:

On the one hand I feel safe because I am so far in my transition that on a daily basis I pass, well, almost pass, as 100% male. I don't get confused for a woman anymore, so I feel safe in that way, and through that I have some sort of a position in society, that I look like a man. Other than when I dye my hair and do my makeup for a part, that's when I feel totally uncomfortable and dangerous, and when I use the public transport I look everywhere around me. (Dymitr)

Dymitr touches upon his passing as a cis-gender man, and how much privilege comes with it. Going back to Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory and the way queer people deal with the stress and anxiety that comes with living in a heteronormative society, we can understand why Dymitr feels safer when passing. Many queer individuals who seek to pass as cis-gender men might feel discomfort when using makeup or dyeing their hair, as the interviewee told me. It took him some time to think of dangerous situations he was put in, as he said he's felt quite safe since transitioning. After a little bit he shared with me a situation in which he felt very unsafe:

You know, for example, when I was in Opole, and I was taking the public transport, and I had my nails painted, I was holding onto the barrier and some guy started chatting to me, asking me what's the time, so I acted uninterested so he would stop talking to me. He looked at me closely, looked at my nails, and he grabbed my jacket, held me close to him and tells me "fucking talk to me, I'm talking to you" (...) Later he asks if I want to have my face beaten at the next bus stop. Then some guy helped me and the guy stopped. (Dymitr)

As Dymitr describes, there was no need to report this happening to the police. He did not even think of that. Most of the interviewees seemed to have at least one story of being discriminated, or even attacked, yet none of them have reported these attacks to the police. It can be interpreted that a distrust of the police force must be common within the community, as KPH (2016) reports in their statistics. I would like to argue that the distrust of the police force is in line with the belief that they, as queer activists, hold less power than the police force, who seems to dismiss many cases of queer discrimination, therefore making the activists scared of ever reporting their own cases.

The last point that emerged within this theme was the lack of security within their relationship on the bases of the law. One of the interviewees shared that their

biggest fear of being queer in Poland is the lack of security they face in terms of their personal relationships:

I don't feel safe or secure when thinking of the future, the visions of family, visions of partnership in Poland, and the visions that no matter who I choose to spend my future with, in 10, in 20 years, there is not guarantee that that partnership would be legal, and that I could seek help from the state, about my partner's health, of the partner I am not formally married to, even if the person is my long-term partner. (Sasha)

In most of the interviews there is an underlying fear of the future as individuals in queer relationships – as even long-term partners of the same-sex who register their partnership in a foreign country are not recognized in the heteronormative Poland. It is a saddening reality that the activist struggle with. This brings me to the next part of the analysis, in which I seek to gain a deeper understanding of building relationships, friendships, as well as maintaining biological bonds of the queer activists I have interviewed.

6.3.1. A lot of trans people believe that they don't deserve love, and that they do not deserve to live. And I thought like that too, and that made me hesitant to transition.

I believe in my circle of friends, everyone is 100% queer. I don't think I have a single cis-het friend... And I think that says a lot. (Dymitr)

When talking to the participants about their support systems and friendships, I concluded that the interviewees tend to build friendships with other queer individuals due to the unspoken acceptance of their sexual orientation and gender identity. When talking about his experiences with building friendships with mostly queer individuals, Damian argued that in a queer space there is much less judgement, therefore he feels much safer:

For example, no one asks about my sexual orientation, or anything like that, because no one cares about it. Everyone is used to the fact that everyone is different. (Damian)

After this statement Damian confided in me that when he goes back to school and is met with people from different backgrounds he feels unsafe:

Everyone [at school] knows of my orientation. After all, there is fear and anxiety there. There is a feeling that people look at me weirdly, or badly. I can even think of one example, where a classmate, who is an open homophobe, and even talked about death for gay people during class, at the same time talks to me and even once stated that he's a hypocrite because of it. (Damian)

As the quote shows, heteronormativity was prevalent in many aspects of life. Damian shared with me that he has been a victim of discrimination in school since he was young. As Herz and Johansson (2015) reasons in their work, non-heteronormative children are often victims of discrimination purely based on their identity. In this thesis I want to argue that this might lead to queer individuals seeking mostly queer friends, as they don't feel the judgement from their side. As the interviewee described, in his life, his queer friends tend to not ask about his orientation, as they are all non-heteronormative and one's orientation does not affect their friendship. In fact, all of the interviewees said that they do in fact have mostly queer friends. To them, this came naturally, as they did not do it intentionally, but they do feel safer around people like them, people from their own communities. Barbara and Zhenya both argued that they never chose to strictly become friends with queer people, but it just happened:

I think that I don't really look at sexual orientation when building a friendship – I just treat a person like a person. And the fact that I mostly

have queer friends comes naturally, it's not like I choose who to be friends with, because sexual orientation doesn't matter. (Barbara)

I never thought about the correlation of my queerness and friendships, but I believe that, I don't know, if I looked at all my friendships, most of my friends would be queer. But it doesn't mean I want my friends to be only queer, I don't choose a friend based on whether they are queer or straight. But it is easier to be close to a queer person. There certainly is no way I would be friends with a homophobic or transphobe. (Zhenya)

The participants seemed to naturally form relationships and friendships with other queer individuals. Although the belonging to the queer community was not a determinate whether the participants will form a relationship with the person, it did help them to feel safer, as other members of their community will understand their struggles:

Well, I just feel like they [queer people] understand me more. They get it. They get my struggles as queer, unlike the straight people, who never were in these situations. (Kaja)

Thanks to the stories of the bonds that queer activists build within their own community I became interested in hearing more about the participants relationships and how they came to be. One of the interviewees touched on his relationship with his fiancée:

I form a family now, with my fiancée and my cat. And you know, my cat, they never misgendered me, right? (laughs) And that's where I get most of the support from. Not only in the context of being trans. (Anton)

He goes onto say that during his surgeries and hospital stays it was his fiancée and her family who helped him, even though they do not have any biological bond. It

meant a lot to him that her family also helped him when he couldn't have his own family's support. Due to the lack of social support queer individuals mental health can deteriorate, according to the interviewee:

A lot of transgender people believe that they don't deserve love, and that they do not deserve to live. And I thought like that too, and that made me hesitant to transition. (Anton)

Due to the lack of acceptance from their family, the participants shared their stories of friendships and chosen families of their own. An overlapping theme in almost all of the interviews I have done was the overwhelming support from people who the interviewees did not share a biological or legal bond with – usually the most supportive people in their lives were their partners and/or friends they have met throughout their adult lives, similarly to the research on chosen families by Jackson Levinet al. (2020). The participants also did not share any biological ties with the closest people in their lives, choosing to create bonds and friendships with chosen families of their own.

Understanding the complex support systems of the interviewees non-biological bonds, I became interested in the way the biological bonds affected their lives. I asked myself many questions, such as, did the participants seek chosen families because of the lack of support from their biological families? Were there other reasons? Maybe these chosen families happen even if a person has a lot of support from their biological families?

6.3.2. The silent support

In this part of the work I will analyze the interviewees family support circles, from how their family relations changed (or did not change) after their coming out, as well as their bonds with other biological family members. Stories of the support of their families varied from participant to participant in this study. The first

overlapping theme in the interviews was a concept that I would like to call the *silent support*. Sasha said that although their mother does not openly accept their sexual identity, she does seem to worry about his safety and well-being. They shared that they usually don't tell their mother about their activism work, but when they do, their mother tends to ask whether they are safe doing that work, and shares that she is scared they might be attacked. Similarly to Sasha, Zhenya shared their way of seeing the silent support from their parental figures. They touch upon a time when their father visited their and their partner's apartment and while walking their dog they noticed a rainbow flag on the balcony, which was visibly dirty from the rain.

And he said: "Damn, you know, I was downstairs, I was walking your dog, and your flag is really dirty. We should throw it out and buy a new one".
(Zhenya)

Zhenya shares that this moment was very meaningful, as their father did not have any issues with the rainbow flag, rather he was sad that it was dirty and old, therefore thought about buying a new one.

He didn't want it to be hanging there, not because it was rainbow, but because it was, damn, dirty and torn? And after that, he gave me money to buy a new one. So I thought that was cool. (Zhenya)

The silent support of families is a theme in almost all of the interviews – there wasn't an activist who's family was very openly supportive, but all of them touched upon moments of silent acceptance and help in small ways. This can help the activists with the daily stress they face as a minority. This brings me to the next part of the analysis, the consequences of being a queer activist in Poland.

6.4. I have already said it 10000 times, and I mean, saying it again is just, dehumanizing, because you truly feel like no one in the world listens to you.

As we touched upon minority stress in earlier parts of this work, the interviewees have pointed out negative consequences of their activism. There are unique stressors that can lead to the activists worsened mental and physical health as a consequence of being faced with discrimination. One of the stressors that was an overlapping theme with the interviewees was guilt. Zhenya pointed out that they often feel very guilty when they were not able to join protests:

[During 2020 protests] I was very sick and I remember... I remember I felt so guilty, guilty that I cannot go and attend physically, because then, it was quite a bit protest. And I did not attend it physically. I remember that I dressed in all black even though I was at home (...) I remember I still posted online with the hashtag, I attended more online. (Zhenya)

Similarly to Zhenya, Anton touched upon the times of the 2020 All-Women's strikes, how he was, at the time, going through a surgery, therefore was not able to protest in person. He felt guilty simply because he could not help physically, even though he was actively using his online platform for education on the topics. Other than guilt, there are many other stressors that heteronormative individuals do not face, but the queer activist have to deal with in their everyday life. During the interview, Anton touched upon the administrative violence that him and many other trans activists are faced with:

Well, these days, the process of correcting your gender in your documents isn't just difficult, it's dehumanizing, and not accessible for everyone. Because as you know, non-binary people cannot choose to put X on their documents, to not identify as any gender, because they have to choose which one they prefer, and that is very dehumanizing. (Anton)

In the context of Poland, trans individuals rights to change their given gender in their documents is a long and (as Anton put it) dehumanizing process. From 1989 until today the only way to change one's sex on their documents is to sue one's parents (Bieńkowska, 2015). This process can be lengthy, uncomfortable and as I said – dehumanizing. Even if one's parents are supportive, trans individuals are forced to sue their own family in order to correct their documents. A trans non-profit organization Transfuzja has prepared a bill which states that trans individuals should legally be able to change their documented gender on their IDs after they are able to live according to their gender after transitioning for 2 years. This is not a perfect solution, as it still reinforces the norms of what a woman and a man should act as. In her work Bieńkowska (2015) touches upon the way trans individuals share their experiences with medical professionals online in order to judge which doctor to turn to – as many of them still misdiagnose trans and gender non-conforming individuals with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. On the website that the author talks about, transseksualizm.pl, a page titled “Black list of doctors” can be found. There, names of the transphobic medical professionals are listed in order to avoid them. Bieńkowska quotes Rzeczkowski, who during his studies on trans individuals in Poland found that many trans and gender non-conforming people have acted differently in front of medical experts, in a way that they believe “a trans person should”, in order to appear more like the “typical” transsexual and therefore continue on with their transition (Bieńkowska, 2012). Even if not fitting into the norms of straight people, trans people are still likely to mask their identity in order to be viewed in a way they believe they should be perceived, similarly to the concept of ‘perfect standard’ of an activist that Bobel (2007) wrote about.

You know, many trans people have more and more problems with people in the law. Yesterday I talked to my close friend, who already had a date for his court hearing, and everything was going smoothly. But suddenly he got note from the court that his hearing got cancelled and they added 2 more lawyers he needs to talk to in order for them to come to the

conclusion that he is, in fact, transgender. Even though his lawyer already gave his opinion. (Anton)

It seems like the interviewees often feel like they need to act a certain way in order to be perceived as, in this situation, a “true” transgender person, or in other situation, to completely hide their identity to pass as straight. In a way, they struggle with fitting into the ‘perfect standard’ of many identities – the perfect standard of an activist, the perfect standard of a trans and/or a queer person. As Lingel (2009) and Billard (2019) show in their works – the struggle of passing is different for every person within the queer community, as trans struggles with passing will be different from the struggles of passing of a bisexual person. These unique stressors often lead to a decrease in mental health (Meyer, 2003). Many of the activists shared that there are times they get very angry at the situation of queer individuals in their country. I would like to end this chapter of my thesis with a powerful quote of one of the interviewees, in which he shared his frustration with the heteronormativity of the Polish country:

How many times can you say the same stuff? And how many times can they throw hate at us? How many times do I have to explain, what is dysphoria, and all the other shit, I have already said it 10000 times, and I mean, saying it again is just, dehumanizing, because you truly feel like no one in the world listens to you. They want to point to one thing to nit-pick your beliefs and show that it's not how you feel, right? (Anton)

Anton decided to share with me the deep frustration that has been a part of his journey as a queer activists since the start. It shows the level of anger that the activists face on a daily, having to repeat the same arguments all the time in order to educate others.

7. Conclusion

In the conclusion I chose to come back to the four themes found within the study, and the answers that the study brought. The first theme being the impact of the political situation on the lives of queer activists in the Polish context. All of the interviewees shared that the political situation has a negative impact on their lives. They believe that, in a way, it was not them who decided that they will become an activist, rather being queer in the Polish context means being political, as their queerness becomes a political issue. To them, protesting and being active in social movements came naturally, if they were not pushed to act that way by the heteronormative state.

The second theme was the different forms of queer activism. When talking to the activists I realized that some types of activism overlapped, such as the physical activism - taking part in protests. There seemed to be a lot of guilt within the queer activists when they were unable to join protests, as they felt like it was their duty to partake in protests when needed, even when their own situations were complicated, such as when they were sick or physically unable to join.

The third theme was the queer perceptions of the sense of safety and security. The findings in this part of the analysis heavily overlapped with the theoretical frameworks of heteronormativity, political power and minority stress. I want to argue that the activists have a deep fear of the police force, as they touched upon in their interviews. Many interviewees shared their negative experiences with the police force and shared that even when they were victims of discrimination, they did not think to report it to the police, as they believe they would be dismissed and not taken seriously. In the queer activist's lives police is the force that hold significant power over the community, as one of the interviewees shared, they are always intimidated by the police during Pride Parades, as they believe they could hurt the queer community. The sense of safety is also linked to the concept of

passing – as a few of the interviewees share that they feel safer when they pass as a heterosexual, cisgender individual. There is a sense of uncertainty when they do not fall into the heteronormative forms, as they fear discrimination. The last point brought by the activists when talking about safety and security was the lack of security on an administrative level, as the activists in non-heterosexual relations do not have the power to register their partnerships.

The last theme of the analysis was the support system of queer activists, both biological and non-biological bonds. An interesting finding I would like to bring up is that the family supports of Polish queer activists are unique. All of the interviewees still remain in contact with their family members, even in situations where their closest family members do not accept their queerness. Many of the activists chose to bring up the concept I named silent support – experiences of their family members silently showing support of their queerness, through small gestures such as asking whether they will be okay protesting (therefore caring about their safety) as well as physical gestures, such as providing money to buy a new rainbow flag when an older one was worn out. In this concept, we can see that although the family figures might overall not be fully accepting of the queer community, they seem to show support in silent ways.

7.1. Further research

This thesis aimed to fill in two gaps – the gap of the lack of Eastern European (particularly Polish) and individual experiences. Many times the activists can be looked at as a collective, forgetting about the importance of individual experiences, which is what my research aimed to deliver. I seek to fill in a gap in the research by taking the time to talk to the activists and get a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. I hope that in the future we can see more academic research on individual experiences. Another sphere of queer research that I wish to see more of in the future is research on queer communities in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. Much of the queer research is based on very Western points of view,

especially on the English-speaking parts of the Western world, with the US being at the front. This research, as much as it is needed and can be brilliant, seems to exclude queer individuals from Eastern Europe and other regions that do not fit in the Western lens. There is still so much more to learn about the queer experiences in Poland, and how the political sphere affects them.

One limitation of my study that I have thought about immensely was the lack of range of ages of the participants. As I have touched upon before, due to the snowball method of sampling, as well as looking for candidates online, I was unable to get in touch with participants over the age of 25. As my sample is all young adult activists, therefore this study might only show the perspectives of this age group. It would be interesting to see a similar study done with participants of all ages, which is an idea I seek to explore in my future works.

Appendix 1. Interview Guide. English version.

Introduction questions:

1. Pronouns
 2. Age
 3. Education
 4. Work situation – are you currently employed? Job seeking? Student?
-
1. How long have you been a queer activist?
 2. If you are comfortable telling me, have you openly come out to your friends, family or coworkers?
 - a. Tell me more about your experience coming out - who did you come out first to? What was the reasoning?
 - b. What was the reaction of the people around you?
Friends/family/coworkers.

Activism work questions:

1. How would you describe your activist work?
 - a. Tell me more about the types of your activism - is your activism online, offline, a mix of both?
 - b. Are you linked to a specific organization or a collective?
2. Tell me how you got involved in activist work.
3. What was your experience of the 2016 and 2020 All Women's Strike protests in Poland?
 - a. If you have taken part in the protests yourself, please tell me about your personal experience.
 - b. How have you heard of the protests?
4. How do you think the political situation in Poland today might be impacting your experience as a queer activist?

Perception of society:

1. How do you think the society might judge you as a queer individual and activist?
2. Support:
 - a. How does your family show support for you as a queer activist?
 - b. How does your community show support for you as a queer activist?
 - c. What does the community of your closest friends and family look like?
3. When forming friendships, do you mostly form them with other queer individuals or does it not make a difference?

Safety of activists:

1. Tell me about your experiences of ever feeling unsafe in Poland and the situations that lead you to feel this way.
2. Similarly to the last question, please tell me about the moments when you felt safe as a queer activist.
3. Tell me about the times you have personally experienced discrimination based on your queerness as an activist in Poland.
 - a. If you were a victim, do you think it was solely based on your sexual orientation or were there other influences?
4. Tell me about your experiences of discrimination faced by other queer activists and queer individuals that you know of.
5. In your opinion, what are possible causes that might lead to the queer community being oppressed?

Transnational activism:

1. Are you familiar with any queer Polish activists that have relocated?
2. What is your perception of queer individuals who have relocated to other countries?
3. Have you ever thought about relocating to another country?
 - a. If so, which country? What were the reasons for that?

Appendix 2. Interview Guide. Polish version.

Pytania początkowe:

1. Zaimki
 2. Wiek
 3. Wykształcenie
 4. Sytuacja zawodowa – czy jesteś obecnie osobą zatrudnioną, poszukujesz pracy, czy jesteś osobą studiującą?
-
1. Jak długo jesteś queer osobą aktywistyczną?
 2. Jeżeli czujesz się komfortowo, czy jesteś otwarcie out przed swoją rodziną, znajomymi bądź pracownikami?
 - a. Powiedz mi więcej o twoim coming out'cie – komu pierwszemu powiedziałaś/eś? Dlaczego?
 - b. Jakie były reakcje wobec Ciebie, gdy zrobiłaś/aś coming out?

Pytania dotyczące aktywizmu:

1. Jak opisałbyś swoją pracę aktywistyczną?
 - a. Czy twoja aktywność ma miejsce w internecie, poza internetem czy jest to połączenie obu form?
 - b. Czy jesteś związany/związana z konkretną organizacją lub kolektywem?
2. Powiedz mi, jak zaangażowałeś/zaangażowałaś się w pracę aktywistyczną.
3. Czy brałeś/brałaś udział w protestach w 2016 lub 2020 roku?
 - a. Jeśli tak, opowiedz mi o swoich doświadczeniach.
 - b. Jak dowiedziałeś/dowiedziałaś się o protestach?
4. Czy uważasz, że obecna sytuacja polityczna w Polsce może wpłynąć na ciebie jako aktywistę/aktywistkę queer?

Spojrzenie na społeczeństwo:

1. Czy osobiście odczuwasz osąd ze strony społeczeństwa?
2. Wsparcie:
 - a. Czy masz wsparcie ze strony rodziny?
 - b. Czy masz wsparcie ze strony swojej społeczności?
3. Tworząc przyjaźnie, czy najczęściej tworzysz je z innymi osobami queer czy nie robi to dla ciebie różnicy?

Pytania odnośnie poczucia bezpieczeństwa w Polsce:

1. Opowiedz mi o momentach, w których czułeś/aś się niebezpiecznie w Polsce, oraz o sytuacjach, które sprawiły, że tak się czułeś/aś.
2. Podobnie do poprzedniego pytania, opowiedz mi o momentach, w których czułeś/aś się bezpiecznie.
3. Powiedz mi o sytuacjach, gdy byłeś/aś ofiarą dyskryminacji ze względu na Twoją orientację oraz bycie aktywistą w Polsce.
 - a. Jeżeli byłeś/aś ofiarą, czy uważasz, że było to tylko ze względu na Twoją orientację seksualną, czy były inne czynniki, które na to wpłynęły?
4. Opowiedz mi o sytuacjach, w których inni queer aktywiści byli ofiarami dyskryminacji, jeżeli o takich słyszałeś/aś.
5. Twoim zdaniem, jakie są powody przez które queer aktywiści w Polsce są dyskryminowani?
- 6.

Aktywizm transnarodowy:

1. Czy znasz aktywistów, którzy przenieśli się za granicę?
2. Jaka jest Twoja percepcja osób queer przenoszących się do innych krajów?
3. Czy kiedykolwiek myślałeś o przeprowadzce do innego kraju?
 - a. Jeśli tak, do jakiego kraju i jakie były powody?

Appendix 3. Information letter. English version.



LUND UNIVERSITY

Hello!

My name is Patrycja Natołoczna, I'm a 2nd year Master's student enrolled in the programme Social Studies of Gender at Lund University, Sweden. I am a queer woman myself who grew up in Poland and lived there until 2021. Currently I am conducting research for my Master's thesis on queer activism in Poland. The study aims to answer following research questions:

1. How do the Polish queer activists experience and handle the contemporary political situation in their country?
2. What implications does a strong heteronormative context of the country have on lived experiences of Polish queer activists?
3. What are the various types of activism implemented by Polish queer activists in recent years?
4. How do Polish queer activists perceive a sense of safety and security in their everyday lives and activism?

The interviews can be conducted in English or Polish. The interview should take no longer than 50 minutes and will be conducted through Zoom (or in a way previously agreed to by the interviewee). There is a possibility of conducting the interviews in person, if the interviewee lives in Opole or Wrocław.

The interviews will be recorded, however the only person with access to the recording will be me and right after the interview I will transcribe the discussion and delete the voice file. The interviews will be 100% anonymous and in my work, I will use fake names when using the data in order to ensure interviewee's anonymity. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you will be able to withdraw from the study at any point before, during, or after the interview.

If you're interested in this research please contact me through the email below:

pnatoloczna@gmail.com

Thank you!
Patrycja Natołoczna

Patrycja Natołoczna

Appendix 4. Information letter. Polish version.



LUND UNIVERSITY

Cześć!

Mam na imię Patrycja Natołoczna oraz jestem studentką 2go roku studiów magisterskich na kierunku Social Studies of Gender na Lund University. Sama jestem queer kobietą, która wychowała się w Polsce oraz żyła tam do 2021. Chwilowo przeprowadzam badania do mojej pracy magisterskiej na temat aktywizmu queer w Polsce. Badanie ma za zadanie odpowiedzieć na poniższe pytania:

1. Jak Polscy queer aktywiści radzą sobie ze współczesną sytuacją polityczną w ich kraju?
2. Jakie implikacje ma heteronormatywny kontekst ich kraju jeżeli chodzi o codzienne życie queer aktywistów w Polsce?
3. Jakie typy aktywizmu są używane przez Polskich queer aktywistów w ostatnich latach?
4. Jak Polscy aktywiści odczuwają poczucie bezpieczeństwa w ich kraju?

Wywiady mogą zostać przeprowadzone w języku angielskim bądź polskim. Wywiad nie powinien zająć więcej niż 50 minut oraz będzie przeprowadzony przez platformę Zoom (bądź w sposób ustalony wcześniej z osobą badaną). Jest również opcja przeprowadzenia wywiadu na żywo, jeżeli osoba badana żyje w okolicach Opola bądź Wrocławia.

Wywiady będą nagrywane, jednak jedyną osobą z dostępem do nagrania będę ja oraz zaraz po wywiadzie zostanie on transkrybowany, a nagranie zostanie usunięte. Rozmowy będą 100% anonimowe oraz w mojej pracy użyję fałszywych imion aby dane badanych były bezpieczne. Twój udział w badaniu jest całkowicie dobrowolny oraz możesz odstąpić od udziału w badaniu w każdym momencie przed, w trakcie, bądź po wywiadzie.

Jeżeli jesteś zainteresowanx, proszę o kontakt na email:

pnatoloczna@gmail.com

Dziękuję!
Patrycja Natołoczna

Patrycja Natołoczna

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