

The voice of unheard

Chai Khana and the importance of independent media in encouraging diversity
and inclusion.



LUNDS UNIVERSITET

Leyla Abdullayeva

Supervisor: Deniz Duru

Examiner: Tobias Linné

MSc in Media and Communication

Lund University

2023

Abstract

“The voice of unheard: Chai Khana and the importance of independent media in encouraging diversity and inclusion” is a master thesis focusing on the case study of Chai Khana, an independent media platform located in the South Caucasus and covering the gender-related stories from the region, and how it represents the voices of gender oppression and marginalisation. Through adopting a methods triangulation approach including the interviews, and textual and visual analysis, the collected data presented interconnectedness of independent media practices, diversity and inclusion, social imaginary and cultural citizenship. The findings of this study contribute to the media and communication studies by elaborating on how enabling social imaginary and cultural citizenship can provide a basis for addressing a region's social and political agenda and create a base for diversity and driving social change.

The theoretical foundation for this study was based on two concepts covered in media and communication studies: social imaginary and cultural citizenship. Referring to the scholarly works of Peter Dahlgren in terms of exploration of new citizenship formats and Charles Taylor regarding understanding the roots of building social imaginary, the research explores the roles of both concepts in terms of media practices. Additionally, the findings of this research provide a foundation to comprehend how these two concepts can enable social change in the long term.

The research findings can be summarised as follows: Firstly, to achieve diversity and inclusion through media, it is important to provide holistic media-making practice by including not only the perspective of protagonists but also the tone of the contributor and acknowledgement of the readers' experience. Secondly, collective efforts and shared experiences are crucial to address the adversity of women and queer communities, and Chai Khana's case provides clear evidence. Lastly, democratic and inclusive societies can be achieved by activating social imaginary and cultural citizenship and building bonds among protagonists, contributors, and audiences through the encouragement of finding their own stories.

Keywords: *Social imaginary, Cultural citizenship, Independent media, Participatory media, Media, Communication, Diversity, Inclusion, Gender in South Caucasus, Queer communities in South Caucasus, Media in South Caucasus, Social change.*

Acknowledgements

It takes a village to write a thesis, and it would be impossible to finish it without the support of the people mentioned below.

I would like to thank:

Deniz Duru, my supervisor. It was her guidance, support and patience that gave me wings during the times when I was ready to quit.

My family, Taleh, Zeynab, Shargiyya and Ziya, for their unconditional love and support.

Eva, my lovely landlady, who provides me with a great place to live and is generous enough to say, “You are now part of the family.”

My friends – wealth I gained throughout life. The ones scattered over Europe: Fidan, Konul, Ulviyya and Aydan. The ones I left back in my hometown, Baku: Sevinj, Lika and others. The ones I acquired in Sweden: Shandana and Gianluca. My apologies to the ones I did not mention here. You all know how important you are to me.

The people of Chai Khana – Lika, Sharaf, Salome and Tati not only for sparing time for me but also for doing what they do. Additionally, I would like to thank Durna, whose prompt responses and actions got me in touch with Chai Khana.

Last but not least, myself. Writing this thesis was one of the hardest things I have done, and I am glad I did it, as it helped me find my inner strength.

Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	6
What is Chai Khana?	6
Aims and research questions	8
Researching Chai Khana	9
Literature review	10
Historical background and context.....	12
Historical context	12
The space and the creative city	13
Diversity, inclusion and gender	15
Media, participation and social imaginary	22
Media and participation	22
Freedom of speech.....	24
Social imaginary.....	24
Cultural citizenship	26
The methodological approach.....	27
Methods triangulation	28
Qualitative interviews	29
Visual analysis.....	31
Textual Analysis	32
Analysis.....	33
Media city.....	35
Historically important, politically neutral and unstable	36
Creative media infrastructure	37
Diverse communities.....	38
Freedom of speech.....	40
Gender in South Caucasus.....	42
Visible and invisible people	43
Taking over male-dominated spaces.....	47
Media and participation	49
Cross-border media platform	50
Pushing the boundaries of storytelling.....	52
Character-driven stories.....	53
Conclusion	55

References.....	61
Appendixes.....	68
1. Consent form.....	68
2. Interview guides.....	69
2.1. Interview with the Executive Director of Chai Khana.....	69
2.2 Interview with Contributors of Chai Khana.....	70
3. Participants.....	71
4. Interview transcript.....	72
4.1. Interview with the Executive Director of Chai Khana, Lika Antadze.....	72
4.2. Interview with the Contributor of Chai Khana, Sharaf Naghiyeva.....	87
5. Samples from interviews.....	96
5.1. Codebook for interviews.....	96
5.2. Analytical coding.....	97
6. Sample from articles.....	110
6.1. Codebook for articles.....	110
6.2. Analysed articles.....	110
6.2. Analytical coding.....	111
6.4. Overview of the coding.....	114
7. Visual Analysis.....	116
7.1. Samples.....	116
7.2. Semiotic analysis.....	117

Introduction

In the heart of South Caucasus, the capital of modern Georgia, Tbilisi, there is a community of artists and creators who tell stories. Not about princes and princesses but stories of people who are unheard, ignored, and oppressed. The kind of people who will not be the protagonist of the mainstream media the majority follows. Instead, they unite under a name familiar to those local to the region – Chai Khana.

Chai Khana is a multi-award-winning media platform that works on highlighting the voice of the unheard in the South Caucasus. The project aims to eliminate the barriers between media and "others" and tell the story of those not mentioned in mainstream media. The website's "about" section emphasizes that they are not telling the stories about their heroes. Instead, they collaborate with them and work together on the storytelling (chaikhana, n.d.).

This factor is well represented in the Azerbaijani photographer Sharaf Naghiyeva's "Alone, but liberated" documentary photography project, posted on the Instagram page of Chai Khana, eventually inspiring the subject of this thesis. Furthermore, reading the full story on the website of the platform, where the artist provided a context for the project and the subject, it is hard not to feel sympathetic to the hardships of the person who has been going through not only systematic oppression of the community she lived in but also of her family (Naghiyeva, 2022). While thinking of the transgender woman, Pari Banu's difficulties back at home and her move to a smaller city, the capital of neighbouring Georgia, and seeing her photos depicting the new life in Tbilisi, one cannot help but ask, "How does Chai Khana offer a voice and belonging to oppressed?"

What is Chai Khana?

Chai Khana refers to "a tea house." However, as mentioned on the website of this platform (chaikhana, n.d.), it is symbolic naming as it refers to historically male-dominated spaces where people would gather to socialize. Nevertheless, Chai Khana, discussed in this thesis, is led by women who want to take over the space and challenge male-dominated thinking by focusing

on the hardships of people in the Caucasus, including women, queer people, and ethnic, racial, and religious minorities.

The stories published by Chai Khana range from topics related to discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation to hardships based on political reasons. For example, the platform publishes about the difficulties of people surviving wars, mainly between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and those affected by the invasion of Ukraine and the Russo-Georgian War. Additionally, the platform highlights the prejudice against LGBTQI+ people and women and poverty in the region.

Although it started in 2015 as a project to train journalists and filmmakers from South Caucasus, Chai Khana also aimed at initiating the peace-building project and dialogue between conflict-affected communities. Nowadays, it hosts content on the website and social media channels, commissioned through open calls and pitches. Submitted by independent contributors, this content focuses on topics that interest Chai Khana. Occasionally, Chai Khana hosts a physical exhibition of the photos but more often organises the screenings of documentary films produced by the platform.

It is essential to understand that their activities do not aim at making a profit. The platform has donors and partners such as the UK Government, Fritt Ord, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, COBERM, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Georgia, Open Society Foundations, the Embassy of Israel in Georgia, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (chaikhana, n.d.). Additionally, the platform's website has a "donate now" section, letting readers contribute financially. Chai Khana does not provide a salary for the contributors, but it offers an honorarium and low-budget support to cover their travel and accommodation expenses.

Chai Khana is based in Tbilisi and welcomes all the artists from the South Caucasus, which includes Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the south of Russia. The exact location of the physical office of this media platform might be surprising as Tbilisi is not the most populated or wealthiest capital among all the others. The city's population is over 1 million (worldpopulationreview.com, n.d.). In comparison to the capital of its neighbour, Azerbaijan, the city is smaller in size and population and has fewer investments in the overall infrastructure and modern architecture. Nevertheless, Chai Khana chose its office to be based in Tbilisi. But why Tbilisi? What does make this city special to host a multimedia platform welcoming the oppressed from South Caucasus?

Chai Khana's Executive Director responded to this inquiry mentioning that Tbilisi hosts the office as it is easier to organise meetings and events in Georgia to include contributors from Azerbaijan and Armenia. There is a conflict between two countries, and none of the citizens of one country are allowed to visit another. Many international and regional events are hosted in Georgia for the same reason: to welcome participants from Azerbaijan and Armenia. Georgia, being neutral about the conflict, offers a safer ground for visitors from both countries. Although this is a valid point, there is more to explore about Tbilisi.

While studying the city's influence on the media platform, it is also important to mention that up until now, Chai Khana has hosted projects from more than 300 contributors from the South Caucasus. These contributors include filmmakers, photographers, and journalists from the region who focus on issues varying from gender discrimination to children's rights and healthcare.

As the Executive Director of Chai Khana, Lika Antadze responded in writing to the question, "What kind of voices are represented by Chai Khana?":

Chai Khana gives voice to underrepresented communities. In Chai Khana's stories, one would find a protagonist who never ends up in "mainstream" media.

It is natural to assume that the contributors to Chai Khana are driven by the interest to bring together the oppressed, help them to voice their struggles, and provide them with an arena to share their stories with the rest of the world.

Aims and research questions

This thesis is based on the case study exploring media production and is guided by the following research questions to provide a direction for the study.

- How do Chai Khana and its contributors support gender diversity and inclusion and represent the voices of the oppressed?
- What kind of gender injustice, oppression, and inequalities do the protagonists of the Chai Khana stories fight against? And how do they do it?
- How does Chai Khana encourage cultural citizenship and social imaginary?

Being expressive about their conditions, struggles, and obstacles to a decent life, be it poverty or discrimination based on gender, people are willing to collaborate with artists to tell their stories and share them with the rest of the world. This collaboration is an act of resistance and a formation of unity based on sharing and informing, which are cultural citizenship and social imaginary.

Researching Chai Khana

To understand the role of Chai Khana in uniting the artists and their subjects to tell a story, two main concepts studied during the Media and Communication Studies program will be adopted. Those are cultural citizenship and social imaginary, both crucial in understanding the relationship between artists and their subjects and the role of Chai Khana in the lives of those subjected to discrimination in the South Caucasus.

Stevenson mentions that legal terms identified by the traditional political approach limit people and their rights to a decent life (2003, p. 4). Therefore, people sharing the same goals and values start setting their terms and definitions by gathering to make their cases loud and clear with Chai Khana. Furthermore, these new terms are shaped by modern society and its transformation, starting from not eating meat products to fighting climate change and deciding on their sexuality which in the past were not part of the political agenda.

Even the formation of Chai Khana comes from the sense of cultural citizenship, as was mentioned in the "about" section of the platform's website (chaikhana, n.d.):

Our name, Chai Khana, is also very symbolic - it means "a tea house" and historically, it was (and still is) a male-dominated space in the South Caucasus, where men usually gather, socialize and exchange ideas. We, Chai Khana, a platform led by women, reclaim this space for discussion from male-dominated cultures and give to it a new meaning.

Based on this description and women's role in the formation of Chai Khana, it was decided to focus on the gender theme and choose three projects as samples to be analysed further in the study. Those projects are:

- Alone, but liberated (Naghiyeva, 2022)
- Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry (Kinkladze, 2022)

- Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations (Sattar, 2023).

It is crucial to consider that people collectively or independently collaborating with the contributors of Chai Khana are those who would like to tell about their hardships to the region they live in and the world. As mentioned on the platform's website, the oppressed people are also taking part in telling the stories by collaborating with the contributors. By agreeing to be the subject of one or another project, they accept to participate in fighting against the system by being loud about the topics their communities are not ready to hear or have never heard about; something, further to Stevenson's description, how the new kind of citizenship is formed (2003, p. 3). Historically, the meaning of citizenship has been limited to country borders and states. Nowadays, it shifted its definition and focused on fighting the discrimination, challenges, and acknowledgement of the oppressed people, called cultural citizenship. This term elevates human rights to a new level far beyond the conventional political agenda.

It is essential to mention how identifying new terms and definitions creates a sense of belonging and bonding. People form social imaginary by coming together to take over a particular space and create unity based on discriminatory experiences that bring them closer. Charles Taylor explains social imaginary as a glue that holds together a group of people and constructs their relations based on the normative beliefs and assumptions that the people may hold (Taylor, 2004, p. 227). Contributors and their subjects portrayed in stories of the Chai Khana are forming a social imaginary to find belonging with the same struggling people.

Literature review

It is crucial to provide scholarly support to this study from various perspectives. Firstly, it is vital to understand the context as this research is a case study: Where is Chai Khana located? How does this location impact the operations of the platform? And what are the top challenges that the media platform is addressing? Answers to these questions could provide a better account of the study topic and how this research approaches it. Secondly, it is vital to understand the motivation behind the platform and why gender is one of the most highlighted topics in Chai Khana. Therefore, the literature review for this study will be divided into two parts.

The first part covers the literature and information on the region's historical background and context. Firstly, this part explores the historical context of the South Caucasus and the role

Tbilisi played in it to provide a basis for the analysis regarding why the Chai Khana office is located in this city. Secondly, further literature is used to understand Tbilisi's role as a creative space. Creating a symbolic meaning attached to a space can be a strategic approach to showcasing powerful imagery (Georgiou, 2013, p. 22). In this case, the city becomes a creative battlefield where ideas and opinions are competing while, in the background, big decision-makers, including government and businesses, are working on recognition of the power (p. 23). This kind of power exercise happened during the study as well; while the interviews for the study were being conducted, thousands of citizens marched in the streets of Tbilisi against the government's attempt to limit press freedom (Demytrie, 2023). Hence, the literature provides a theoretical basis for analysing how creativity is practised in Tbilisi. Thirdly, a review of the literature explores diversity, inclusion and gender relations in the South Caucasus, and how socially constructed gender roles create challenges for the people of the region, and also what kind of impact media plays in those. Gender roles are assigned from birth, and the mainstream media focuses on explicitly highlighting these roles without considering the current political and social state. Hence, in times like these, those suffering from indifference replace the mainstream media with "their own" (Matar, 2005). In a context as such, there is Chai Khana, an alternative platform to provide a space for those who might resonate with their stories.

The second part of the literature review looks deeper into the media, participation and social imaginary. Firstly, the overview of the resources provides contextual information on independent media such as Chai Khana and its role in driving the journalistic and creative capacity to tell stories that no one had heard before. Dahlgren points out that internet connection and the web space allow others not from journalistic backgrounds to be involved in media making (2013, p. 109). The impact of these players in the game can make a significant shift toward inclusivity and provide a diversity of limitless magnitude. Hence, this thesis explores how Chai Khana is essential in creating the basis for these storytellers and supporting them in their contributions. Secondly, the literature study digs deeper into the importance of freedom of speech and its current situation in the South Caucasus region. Thirdly, this part dwells on explaining how people living in the region form solidarity in the period of adversity, consequently forming a social imaginary (Taylor, 1994). Further to exploring Chai Khana, this part of the literature review also explores the relationship between the artists and their protagonists, and how they connect through the social imaginary. And finally, the overview of the resources delves deeper into the alliance between the authors and their protagonists and how they form cultural citizenship to highlight their livelihood challenges and voice their

desires about what kind of society they want to live in (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 53). It is as if the protagonists discuss their current affairs through the contributors' lenses and vice versa. It is as if storytelling highlights the challenges imposed upon them by men whose decisions are traditionally considered rational and dominant (Doona, 2016, p. 42).

Historical background and context

It is essential to conceptualise the city to provide a broad and informative explanation of the space Tbilisi offers to a multimedia platform. Further to Habibi, a city should not be limited to a simple and straightforward definition (2020, p. 39). That way, in terms of context, multiple descriptions might provide a better-defined understanding of the city's role in media making. Therefore, the first part of the literature review will cover the historical context of the region and the city, the creative capacity of Tbilisi, and diversity, inclusion, and gender in the South Caucasus.

Historical context

Historically, Tbilisi is considered to have a decisive role in the politics of the South Caucasus. Tbilisi was the administrative centre of The Caucasian Viceroyalty, an administrative division of the Russian Empire that included the administrative units of the Southern and Northern Caucasus and existed from 1801 to 1917 (Chikovani, 2005, p. 50). This positioning played an essential role in creating favourable conditions for reviving cultural relationships with the region's local people.

Following the abdication of Czar Nicolas II and the collapse of the Russian Empire, the political importance of Tbilisi did not cease to exist. On the contrary, it became the headquarter of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, a short-lived state that existed between 22 April 1918-26 May 1918 and consisted of the current countries of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. It collapsed due to internal political conflicts and external pressures from the other countries, and all three: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, announced their independence again in Tbilisi (Brisku and Blauvelt, 2021).

The political situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan shifted the importance of Tbilisi in the region. Once again, Tbilisi has become an important regional centre, this time for

communication between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Because of the closed borders between the two countries, Tbilisi became a crucial exchange point for people and information between both countries. This opportunity armed the city with a strategic advantage as a mediator. Furthermore, it served as a means of introducing a social and economic structure of the city in a way that can be a centre in a specific area (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 151). In the case of this study, it played a role in hosting a cross-border media platform – Chai Khana. Moreover, its politically neutral role in South Caucasus advanced the city’s positioning in terms of media practices. Of course, this helped the city to be “branded and re-formed into a specific impression to gain particular benefits” (Habibi, 2020, p. 40).

Understanding the historical background of the space allows gaining a deeper knowledge of how the region was shaped and became what it is now.

The space and the creative city

The creation of the city space circulates among three conceptualisations: spatial, imagined, and reality (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). When thinking of the city, the first feature one might consider is the characteristics such as spatiality and the material commodities it might offer (p. 90). The city's spatial structure was one of the first qualities when considering the relationship between Tbilisi and Chai Khana. The neighbouring country, Azerbaijan’s capital, has more infrastructure for hosting international events and media platforms (Three upcoming sporting events promoting Azerbaijan on a global scale, 2014).

Tbilisi is not the biggest city in the South Caucasus. Moreover, economically it is not the richest one and does not have experience in hosting grand international events. Baku, on the other hand, the capital of Azerbaijan, is the original oil city, with the oil industry highly impacting its economic, political, and physical development (Blau, Rupnik, and Baan, 2017). The city started gaining popularity in the 1950s and 1960s due to the booming oil industry, which expanded the city and rapidly constructed housing settlements (Valiyev, 2016, p. 133). Further demographic increase in the population of Baku during the post-Soviet period gave rise to architecture and construction industries, and the 2000s were noted down as the period of investment in the city's futuristic architecture. This, however, was also motivated by the fact that Azerbaijan started demonstrating interest in hosting international events such as Eurovision Song Contest, European Games, and Formula 1. Organizations of such events were beneficial in putting the country's name in international media, eventually promoting the

country as a touristic destination (p. 134). Nevertheless, the Chai Khana office is not based in Baku, where the spatial infrastructure offers more in terms of international connections but in Tbilisi, a smaller city.

Habibi referring to the sense of communal home in his research site, Bandung, drives attention to what attracts creatives to the collectives at the location (2020, p. 147). While discussing what bonds the people living in the area, he mentions that besides art, people share similar values (p. 167). In that sense, it is possible to highlight the same kind of bond between the people of Tbilisi, where Chai Khana is located, which also finds a reflection in one of the video reports of the platform; Azerbaijani artists are finding a home in Tbilisi (chaykhana, n.d.).

This makes Tbilisi a global city, a definition of something that has been able to exchange information with the rest of the world by providing flows and inclusion of people, ideas, and media (Georgiou, 2013, p. 2).

It is essential to view the urban cultural form, which starts from food culture to the media and combines the power of cultural industries with the other service industries to support the global city as a cosmopolitan place of production (Georgiou, 2013, p. 33). However, cosmopolitanism should not be perceived as a static process because it has a dual meaning, one of which is embedded in social practices and the other in the constant contradiction of ideologies (p. 8).

In comparison, economically, Tbilisi has less foundation to offer regarding the physical space for a regional media hub. Tbilisi is more associated with its cultural and artistic scene with its underground art (Coldwell, 2018), national dances (Antidze, 2012), and romanticism that is to be sourced back to the Soviet era. Hence, it resonates with Myria Georgiou's statement that not only the city needs media, but the media itself needs the city as it provides an area for exchanging information and stories (2013, p. 2). Georgiou also mentions the importance of imaginary and powerful symbolism in creativity and diversity, supplemented with experimentation. This is a collective representation the city holds in the minds of people who have experienced the city through cultural representations such as literature, movies or other art (Highmore, 2005).

The last concept, lived city, is closely linked to the everyday life of the people living in the city or visiting it (Highmore, 2005). Habibi discusses the importance of not framing the description of a city into one approach but adopting several perspectives, as he refers to Stevenson and Highmore (Habibi, 2020, p. 39). Mentioning the importance of hardships of everyday life in creating media, Habibi points out how experience within a city is important to form an artistic

community and creative collectives (2020, p. 145). This idea is what Georgiou also refers to when reminding us that city as a place is not only lived in but also consumed (2013, p. 7).

Considering these concepts is important to make the analysis of the city and provide the context in relation to Tbilisi and the reason for its being Chai Khana's physical location. Tbilisi's role in the region is not limited to the political one only. It is also known as a creative hub and destination offering cultural richness and diverse artistic expression, including music, dance, and cinema. Thus, the city offers an attractive media production environment which shapes Tbilisi as a cosmopolitan place of production (Georgiou, 2013, p. 33).

In addition to this cultural and creative scene, Tbilisi also hosts the regionally acclaimed university, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs. The institution's Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management welcomes regional media professionals and establishes a solid academic ground for media production. The university offers Bachelor's programs in Audio-Visual and Media Art, Digital Media and Communication, and Master's programs in Public Relations and Multimedia Journalism and Media Management. Furthermore, one can be enrolled in training related to photography and videography and explore other media and art-related classes (gipa.ge, n.d.).

In such a creatively thriving environment, it is possible to assume that media production is possible by large-scale organizations and small, ethnic and other community media (Georgiou, 2013, p. 33), including LGBTQI+. In fact, Tbilisi hosts queer art collective Fungus, a community of 20 artists fighting against the marginalisation of the LGBTQI+ community (Kentish, 2021).

Using the theoretical framework provided by Lefebvre (1991), the city of Tbilisi will be analysed based on the value it provides spatially, imaginatively, and in reality. This is essential to evaluate the capacity and the potential Tbilisi offers for a media platform.

Diversity, inclusion and gender

Tbilisi's experience as an administrative centre to The Caucasian Viceroyalty and Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic pushed the cultural exchange in the city to a new level, encouraging multiculturalism in the past few centuries. Multiculturalism is essential to be included in this thesis further to the Soviet past of Tbilisi and multiculturalism being a central concept in colonized countries. As in all colonized countries' cases, in Georgia as well,

multiculturalism was used to defeat the alienation of diverse religious and ethnic communities and ensure peaceful co-existence within the society (Vertovec, 2018, p. 168).

Another story published by Chai Khana, “International space” on the ground” (Shahin Karimova, n.d.), is a mere glance at the multicultural scene of Tbilisi, where Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians live in peace, where it is possible to detect conviviality as a way of sharing a space for a living with representatives of different ethnicities, religions, and so on (Duru, 2015, p. 244).

Although studies performed in Europe provide a background for the analysis of conviviality in Georgia, it is worth mentioning that the sources focusing on the South Caucasus region are limited. Nonetheless, it is crucial to separate Tbilisi from its Soviet colonialist era and put it into a post-colonial context, where conviviality makes more sense to explain the peaceful life of diverse ethnicities and religious communities as it provides more of an enduring practice (Duru, 2015, p. 248). Such an approach to peaceful co-existence creates a social imaginary among the people living in Georgia as the oppression during the Soviet era was replaced by the economic collapse in the post-Soviet period, which still prevails. These difficulties tie the people living in the country together, although they are ethnically and religiously diverse (Taylor, 1994, p. 227). Nevertheless, neither conviviality nor multiculturalism cover gender-related topics. Thus, there is a need to refer to a more comprehensive and inclusive term that covers gender diversity and oppression, as this is the subject that the study explores.

In terms of diversity, Tbilisi offers a safer place for the LGBTQI+ community too. In recent years, clubs and art communities have been openly welcoming LGBTQI+ representatives and working toward acknowledging LGBTQI+ rights (Jackson, n.d.). Furthermore, Tbilisi has the experience of holding a gay parade (Team GT, 2022). However, in previous years, this attempt resulted in disruption due to counter-demonstration by far-right protesters (Georgia: Tbilisi Pride cancelled amid violent protests, 2021). These attempts and experiences to achieve the acknowledgement of LGBTQI+ rights demonstrate a willingness to fight against the system and the traditional gender role that society holds, thus, creating a new form of citizenship – cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 2003, p. 3).

These experiences create the imagined city, which is held in the imagination of people living outside of Tbilisi and produced through various media materials (Highmore, 2005). However, on the other hand, the imagined city is a way different space than the lived city, which Lefebvre

explains as a contradiction between a person's private life and choices and what the public life offers (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 362).

Habibi refers to a newly developed "Urban class" when identifying a new identity celebrating diversity (2016, p.15), which is considered to be generated by the impact of the media and formed based not on the similarities of one's socioeconomic identity but signified by the differences. How this is achieved is another question to be discussed.

Defining identity in the South Caucasus is challenging as this region has been impacted by the political appetite of Russia, Iran and Turkey. It has been subjected to various political and social movements; additionally, in the case of Azerbaijan, it has been heavily impacted by Islam as well (Tohidi, 1996, p. 111).

For analysis of the thesis, adopting a unified feminist outlook may not be desirable as this severely excludes important characteristics such as race, class, and ethnicity (Harding, 2008, p.113). In this case, it is crucial to consider the complicated history of the economic and political situation. Hence, the intersectional framework addressing various factors, including the ones mentioned above, will help provide a better explanation of the gender topic in the region.

It is important to note and consider that the struggles of women and queer people in the South Caucasus also vary based on the political situation in each of the countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Even focusing on each country separately may not provide a better understanding of the situation as the social and economic mobility in the region varies dramatically based on various factors, such as education level, family background, and economic and social capital. It is important to draw upon the thoughts that changing gender roles are considered one of the most radical movements (Vertovec, 2018, p. 167), especially in culturally conservative regions such as South Caucasus. While focusing on the region, one can focus on the fact that the root of the problem lies in socioeconomic deprivation or, on the contrary, not considering the changing roles might be the reason for the socioeconomic deprivation (p. 169). Geographic location is also important as there is a huge gap in opportunities offered in urban and rural spaces. Additionally, the region's political instability, including armed conflicts, wars, and changes of governments that have been impacted by the big decision-makers in the area, such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey, also affect the livelihood and rights of citizens (Tiwari et al., 2018).

Gender roles in the USSR were traditionally assigned back at the time: the man was the breadwinner, and the woman was the house lady. Under the regime which promoted motherhood broadly, there was no way around it. Women's primary role mainly focused on reproduction and carrying out other traditionally assigned duties, such as caring for the household (Issouпова, 2012). However, their participation in social and political life during the Soviet period was encouraged by World War II as women had to fill in for the lost work power (Edmondson, 1992). Men fought in the front line, and women had to replace them, thus, providing an essential contribution to the economy of the USSR. The economic contribution during the war pushed further women's participation in social life, especially in Soviet East, including Azerbaijan providing them with more opportunities in terms of education when compared to neighbouring Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey and Iran (Tohidi, 1996, p. 113). However, barriers still halted the progress, resulting in fewer representatives among the regime's top leadership until the collapse of the Soviets.

In post-Soviet countries, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the transition from a communist system to a capitalist one was not smooth. On the contrary, after the collapse of the USSR, newly established republics faced political and economic turmoil that made life hard for the citizens, especially women. In addition, security reasons and the desire to hold and maintain power, in some cases with military resources, pushed women further away from the political arena. As a legacy of that transition, few women are in high-ranking political positions today (www.wilsoncenter.org, n.d.).

After the fall of the USSR and the lifting of the "iron curtain," the South Caucasus had to go through wars, economic collapse, and an exposition to the ideologies popular in the West. On one side, the region wanted to embrace democracy and equality, which Vertovec draws upon when discussing embracing multiculturalism in the West. However, on the other hand, it did not consider inclusivity in terms of gender-related issues (Vertovec, 2018, p. 168). Campaigns related to sex education and promoting gender equality and women's rights were out of the question. Several attempts were initiated by the organizations supported with Western sponsorships or commercial organisations, which put the motivation of those under question. Hence, as Stuart Hall mentions, these attempts were seen as exploiting the shifting gender roles (2001, p. 3).

While Vertovec focuses on Europe's phases in the path to multiculturalism (2018, p. 168), Grillo highlights three phases in the UK (2007, p. 979), which start with the public debates and

shift slowly toward internet forums. Considering the historical context of the South Caucasus, the period towards multiculturalism was not this gradual. Hence, after the lift of the "iron curtain," the flow of information and publicly available sources exceeded expectations. Facing the information flow from the West on changing gender roles was too much to handle for the locals of the post-Soviet region. Hence, the journey toward multicultural society was more chaotic, and there was a need for platforms where these topics could be addressed. Historically, each shift towards multiculturalism and inclusiveness had its platform (Grillo, 2007, p. 986). Nevertheless, the South Caucasus did not have the sources to offer such a platform for these shifts. Thus, there is always a need to address gender-related issues toward an equal society, and the thesis explores how Chai Khana fulfils this role in the South Caucasus.

The transition from USSR was even more tumultuous for queer communities. Homosexuality was treated as "decadent bourgeois morality" by the Soviet regime (Mole, 2018, p. 2). It was mainly a case during the Stalinist period as less educated party members replaced the regime's founders with an intelligentsia background. As a result of such a change, the war against class intensified, and homosexuality was perceived as a social-class-related issue. Hence, later on, the existence of queer communities in the USSR could have been comprehended as the defeat of socialism. Consequently, homosexuality was criminalised.

The intersectional framework must be taken into account - highlight Healey, and Stella providing an account of a queer doctor living in Soviet Georgia who relying on his social class, can escape the persecution by law enforcement and uses his educational background and profession as a method of concealing his sexuality (Healey and Stella, 2021). While not being processed by police could save one from jail, it would still create public condemnation. Hence, gays and lesbians maintained a low-profile public life, staying in the closet and performing their respective masculine and feminine roles until the collapse of the USSR.

The invisibility of queer communities did not play to their advantage after the collapse of the Soviet regime. As Mole mentions, the sudden appearance of queer communities in public life after the decriminalisation, in the case of Russia, created a wave of turmoil and appeared to be a threatening element to the already shattered social system (2018, p. 3).

The second principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights highlights (United Nations, 1948) that every individual, without discrimination based on their gender, has rights and freedom. The declaration of this principle has been a milestone in developing global principles and norms to eliminate discrimination against women.

In recent years, LGBTQI+ in the South Caucasus has been more visible than ever (Tuller, 2004), which is troublesome for the traditional societies in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Nevertheless, the media representation of the community is limited. The media coverage of LGBTQI+ focuses on crime and law enforcement-related issues, creating a negative view of the community (Van Der Veur, 2007). In addition, the coverage of certain stereotypes, especially the ones referring to the representation of sexual minorities as sex workers, creates a highly biased view of an LGBTQI+ persona. By highlighting and conveying these images, the media creates more “real” gender categories (Gauntlett, 2008, p.151), which encourages the thinking that anything else apart from traditional gender is abnormal, profane, and problematic.

While international organizations have worked toward building a more inclusive and equal society, many scholarly pieces were published to highlight the media challenges that affect women by representing them as distorted and stereotyped (Tuchman 1978; Gallagher 1985; Van Zoonen 1994).

The traditional and fixed roles of gender are essential in the South Caucasus. Although the post-traditional society allows the citizens to be more fluid in their identity and lifestyle, Giddens points out that this is possible only in societies where modernity has been achieved (Gauntlett, 2008, p.105).

In the South Caucasus, a woman’s role and contribution to society are either invisible or barely noticed. If the media do not display a woman as a caretaker of the family, she will probably be represented as a low-life person (Tuller, 2004). The media representation of women primarily offers a negative or positive view without focusing on context and creating fixed and traditionally assigned roles, expectations, and behaviours (Gauntlett, 2008, p.104). There seems to be a disparity in terms of what is visible to society and what society ignores to see. The media’s role in maintaining this approach is quite visible. Still, the question that needs to be addressed is where the tradition’s roots are.

One of the well-known resources to analyse women's distorted representation in media is Erving Goffman's (1985) *Gender Advertisements*, where the author uses what is known to us as semiotic analysis to point out how gender is depicted in the advertisements. This work has been influential in giving rise to other studies in the same field, like Jean Kilbourne, who researched the media representation of women and the long-term consequences this had on shaping the role of women in the global world (2000, p. 171).

Understanding women's maintaining role is possible by diving into Joke Hermes's analysis of the women's audiences and how women's consumption of mainstream media generates expectations regarding their role in society (1995, p. 94). The scholar provides a fair account when analysing the gender definitions, positioning, and identification by focusing on the context and social discourse (p. 101), including religion and class.

The Gender Assessment Report on Armenia produced by Asian Development Bank provides a synopsis of the gender role expectations in the rest of the South Caucasus (p. 43), mentioning how the norms influence the division of labour. For example, irrespective of whether a woman has a job outside of the home or not, women are responsible for most of the household chores.

Gender roles are limited to their traditional meaning in the South Caucasus. However, exposing audiences from the region to these types of stories offers an invitation to the lives of the oppressed through which they can create empathy. It is a well-practised approach in media production to challenge stereotypes and focus on the human aspects. Hence, it is crucial to focus on Gauntlett's analysis of gender representation in the media when focusing on queer lead characters (2008, p. 93). Although this is an important direction, in Gauntlett's case, this is a limited analysis as the author focuses on well-known queer movies.

In the global arena, the shift in gender roles is quite significant, and women are usually seen as self-reliant, whereas men's masculinity has been less straightforward (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 98). This point can be perceived as troublesome as recognizing the toxic masculinity identity has been more challenging to identify in the media pieces. At this point, it is also essential to explore Anderson's study of inclusive masculine theory, which provides an opportunity to understand how multiple masculinities can exist altogether (2009, p. 94). He often references Connel, who worked on the notion of hegemonic masculinity and argued that one form of masculinity had been put above all the other masculinities, and men are culturally expected to follow this form (1995, p. 77).

One of the difficulties in understanding overall gender representation and discrimination of women in the region of South Caucasus is the lack of resources. Local data sources do not provide a realistic view of the region. On the other hand, global organizations ignore this geographical location, as given in the case of a report provided by the International Women's Media Foundation report (Byerly, 2011).

This study explores how Chai Khana attempts to “voice” by covering the topics from the region that the traditional media chose to ignore. According to Couldry, “voice” is vital in political

representation as it allows one to articulate the sufferings and offers to have a “voice” as an opportunity to share your story and be heard (2010). Calling a media platform Chai Khana is an act of taking over a male-dominated space – tea houses where men discuss the political and social agenda, thus, having a say in the overall social structure of the region. By doing so, Chai Khana aims to achieve justice and acknowledgement - an understanding Stevenson describes as cultural citizenship (2003). Cultural citizenship is achieved through media practices to resolve the challenges of marginalised and oppressed communities and achieve equality.

The theoretical resources mentioned in this sub-section provide a contextual explanation and of diversity in South Caucasus and intersectional theoretical framework for analysing the complicated gender relations in the South Caucasus. At this point, it is essential to mention that none of the countries in the region have constitutions restricting gender rights. Nevertheless, as Grillo refers to Jenkins with "cultural diversity" (p. 983), they are not coupled, which means that even though the law supports gender equality, culturally and in real-life practice majority still face discrimination in the community they live in. Hence, it is important to adopt the intersectional framework for the analysis. Considering that there are no recorded data on discrimination and no statistics that could highlight the oppression, this becomes one of the problems of contemporary multiculturalism (Grillo, 2007, p. 993).

Media, participation and social imaginary

Individuals can impact society, but this can be achieved through collective determination (Burr, 1995, p. 76). Collectiveness is important in driving social change and resonates with Chai Khana's values as well. Therefore, this part focuses on media and participation in the South Caucasus, freedom of speech, social imaginary, and cultural citizenship.

Media and participation

In South Caucasus, women’s participation in politics is less visible, and in the case of Azerbaijan, female activists participating in mass demonstrations were subjected to brutal treatment by law enforcement (Mehrabov, 2016). For example, during the women’s march aimed at protesting domestic violence and women’s brutal killings, the demonstrators faced brutal disruption by the police (Namazov, 2021). Hence, while law enforcement often obstructs

the offline struggle, the media offers an alternative dimension to voice injustice and influence (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 33) gender-related difficulties, including the oppression of LGBTQI+.

Access to an abundance of resources on the internet provides an opportunity for individuals to participate in democratic processes (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 117). Hence, the materials reviewed in this sub-section are central to understanding how Chai Khana creates a basis for public participation in social and political issues.

In addition, besides studies as such, it is also essential to highlight the importance of women's access to resources and media ownership as well (Byerly & Valentine, 2016). The reason for mentioning this is closely related to Chai Khana's mission, as mentioned by the Executive Director, Lika Antadze, to provide a platform for the stories that otherwise will not be highlighted by mainstream media. The media platform plays a vital role as it provides a look at gender relations and an opportunity to be aware of women's maintaining role (UNESCO, 2019, p. 26) in the South Caucasus. Hence, on the one hand, it is possible to claim that the media made women into victims. However, on the other hand, we must consider that media makes it possible for women to see themselves objectively and how they fit in today's world (Ang and Hermes, 1991, p. 311).

Published stories on topics that have never been talked about publicly are an attempt to voice concerns about the social situation in the region. Stevenson refers to this as electronic democracy – a concept about how resistance and collective efforts can be mobilised through the internet (Stevenson, 2001, p. 12). Connectivity through the internet provides more of a horizontal communication which, according to Dahlgren, entails collective support, organisation of the support, and strengthening identity (2013, p. 40). Furthermore, all this support is linked to the networking character of the internet. The liberation of people in expressing themselves and addressing the issues of their society is crucial for the emergence and development of the democratic public spheres. Dahlgren refers to civil society as a requirement for transforming into a public space and, subsequently, political life (2013, p. 53).

Although Chai Khana is based in South Caucasus and spotlights the stories from the region, it is still considered a global media space that Silverstone considers a challenging environment (2007, p. 12). These spaces play an essential role in forming civil society, a base for a democratic environment. Therefore, oppressive practices, conflicts, and tumultuous political situations hinder these types of media's thriving.

Freedom of speech

Further to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index report published by Reporters Without Borders and evaluating the status of journalists, among 180 countries, Azerbaijan is ranked 168th. In contrast, Armenia is 61st, and Georgia is 60th (Caucasus Watch, 2020). The report sums up the South Caucasus's current situation regarding freedom of speech and journalistic practices. Regarding civil organisations and practising freedom of speech, Georgia is way ahead of Azerbaijan and ranked slightly higher than Armenia. Hence, the location of the Chai Khana office in Georgia can be justified as it is a space where independent media can function.

More independent media means an environment allowing the practising democratic self-determination and inclusion of diverse communities (Taylor, 1994). Therefore, freedom of speech is vital for having a democratic political culture and inclusiveness regarding ethnicity, religious belonging, sexual orientation, and subsequently voicing their concerns.

Lack of visibility is a remarkable blow to inclusiveness and results in the alienation of queer people (Richardson, 2003, p157). In the South Caucasus region, over the decades, people have been marginalised for their sexual orientation; for example, they have been ignored and socially excluded. The review of the existing literature on this topic was helpful in exploring the role of Chai Khana in promoting free expression. This kind of approach is especially harmful to queer communities. The media in Azerbaijan does not cover any material related to queer communities; in a few exclusive cases, the media coverage includes negative representation of the LGBTQI+ community (Van der Veur, 2007, p. 30-31).

Relatively higher rates of freedom of speech in Georgia offer more space to draw attention to these topics, although there are still spaces to be addressed. Areas for improvement were addressed by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly as the parliament invited all three countries, including Georgia as well, to adopt codes to prevent the stigmatisation of the LGBTQI+ communities through media (Lacroix, 2021).

Social imaginary

Cultural identity is something that is constantly subjected to transformation (Hall, 2020, p. 225). Since it is not a fixed notion but rather dynamic and constantly changing, this creates a conflict with the identities in the South Caucasus, as the identities in this region are considered

to be fixed. Consequently, this attitude marginalises people when they do not fit into this kind of fixed traditional model. Forming social imaginary plays a vital role in shaping a community and, thereafter, driving social change. The public sphere of knowledge plays an essential role in modernity (Taylor, 2006).

The desire to help, fight for their rights, and empower the communities is the point when cultural citizenship is formed. Using the internet as a space for connection and support can be an empowering experience, and this space can be utilised in many diverse ways (Gauntlett, 2007).

A similar approach was practised in a number of Western countries when the schools were encouraged to include gay history in their curriculum to prevent bullying of gay students (Anderson, 2010).

Using the internet as a space for connection and support can be an empowering experience, and this space can be utilised in many diverse ways (Gauntlett, 2007). Chai Khana's impact in this scenario is providing a platform encouraging storytelling and using the internet to be more agile further to the political and social situation.

Taylor mentions that social imaginary enables the understanding and interpretation of society's behaviours, relations, and practices and allows them to build a narrative around these experiences (1994, p. 159). Social imaginary often happens unconsciously (Taylor, 1994) as what shapes a community and creates bonds within it seems to be a part natural process. Hence, detecting those connections and why people continue experiencing them is often hard.

Gaining skills in media production is very important as the media, especially considering its long-lasting influence on the masses, offers political dominance and legitimation. Moreover, in Europe, this discovery of cultural politics gave rise to social movements that started challenging elitism and recognized the culture as a product of media to be a space for power contestation (Bloomfield and Bianchini, 2001, p.102).

Social imaginary created by the protagonists of these stories and artists will be one of the essential terms to be considered throughout the research. Thus, literature on this topic will be used as a theoretical basis for identifying the practice of social imaginary. Social imaginary is not a set of ideas but rather an enabler of making sense of societal practices (Taylor, 2004, p. 2), and it will be essential to recognise these in the case of Chai Khana.

The definition of the term is relatively away from the intellectually accepted frameworks of what works for a community. Taylor explains it as the imaginative way of social existence and how people imagine fitting the rest (2004, p. 24). Longo, when referring to social imaginary, mentions it as a part of every media platform, and it tells a story and experiences through creative media expression (2021). It is a critical moment to consider as it means that every media produced in cooperation with Chai Khana also highlights the social imaginary of artists, storytellers, and the oppressed.

Cultural citizenship

The thesis investigates how Chai Khana showcases cultural citizenship by allocating resources for the younger generation of authors, thus, providing the basis for social change. While using the internet's empowering capabilities allows the authors to explore new perspectives (Gauntlett, 2007), which Lika Antadze thinks is attractive for the audiences.

It is as if these sufferings and shared perceptions bring audiences closer to the protagonists, although they may not be from the same background. This unity plays an important role in sharing and exchanging experiences which is an important factor in understanding modern society (Taylor, 2004, p. 160).

There is always a tendency to search your own media, which resonates with you and your shared beliefs (Silverstone, 2007, p. 94). Hence, women in traditional societies feel more connected to the mainstream media that associates with their own experiences. There is also another issue in terms of media representation distribution. The unequal representation and exclusion in the cities shaped by media, particularly where power is held by capital, biases, and untruthful account, can be present in media reporting and storytelling (Silverston, 2007, p. 37). Theoretical background for cultural citizenship provides a ground to understand how it can be formed and utilised by Chai Khana to contribute to gender equality in the region.

Forming the bond with the protagonists to address the issues of power and discrimination through effective and creative practices is the ability to exercise cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 2001, p. 11). Telling the stories creatively and constantly pushing the boundaries of media productions helps extend the understanding of modern identities, thus, being more accepting of their role and standing in modern society.

It is also important to mention that the media, in the case of Chai Khana, is bringing to attention cultural citizenship, highlighting the discrimination of various institutions against the people who are the subject in this case and the battle of oppressed (Stevenson, 2001, p. 45). How does it work when it comes to the sentiment created between an audience and the content? First, of course, the audience, in this case, the people who associate themselves with the suffering of Chai Khana protagonists, might shift their role from viewer to participant. Further to a citation from Lorenzoni, to build a better sentiment, creating an artistic influence is very important as it motivates to sympathize, show support and fight for a cause (Lockean, 2020, p. 155).

It is essential to understand the logic and motivation behind the discussions of each content online. Besides the negative comments and messages from the audience, the platform receives an abundance of encouraging feedback. By exchanging ideas, people feel part of the community, suffering and experiencing, and find a community where they might belong (Hermes, 2006, p. 306-307). Dahlgren focuses on that to drive attention to how the conditions provided by the internet make it possible for audiences to engage in a new way of expressing themselves and forming a citizen identity (Dahlgren, 2009, p.199). Lokean discusses the multiplying influence of digitalization on strengthening participation or making the materials exhibited more approachable (2020, p. 165). It opened doors for more audiences, and the absence of physical space made it easier for the participants to take a stand or demonstrate their support. She cites Kidd, highlighting how the digital settings made it easier to invite viewers to take participation in the “conversation” (Kidd, 2014, p. 74-75).

The methodological approach

While talking about science, one can always find themselves in discourses related to the comparison of natural and social sciences. Social sciences have always been at the intersection of multiple directions and reorganization (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 30). This instability has put the legitimacy of social sciences under question.

Flyvbjerg, when analysing the social sciences, highlights the link between power relations and knowledge, mentioning the physical, economic, political, and environmental realities (2001, p. 155). The relation between power and knowledge offers an opportunity to question the social constructionism of rationality. Context is crucial in social sciences, and Flyvbjerg points to this explicitly while elaborating on the statements of Dreyfus and Bourdieu (2001, p. 47-48). Context dependence allows a researcher to understand the complex nature of actions and their

interpretations. Historically, the importance of context has not been taken seriously as the scientific community has been dominated by certain standpoints, which predominantly were produced by Western institutions.

Another example of dominating standpoints is women's socially constructed experiences and how it has made it difficult to study discrimination against them by ignoring the hardships (Harding, 1986). Harding is one of the critics of these power relations and mentions the Western institutions and their influence to be dominant in studying the rest of the world (2008, p. 30). Hence, context is important for social sciences, and putting the study phenomenon into one framework would provide a limited scope for analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 145). Using a methods triangulation approach, on the other hand, will provide a wider look with the inclusion of the context and a deeper understanding of the study phenomenon. Several methods will be triangulated to understand how Chai Khana functions and how it supports the artists and their protagonists by offering them a platform for the stories.

Methods triangulation

Methods triangulation refers to using more than one method of data collection. In social sciences, this approach provides an ample mapping of human behaviour by including the use of both quantitative and qualitative data (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000, p. 112). To understand the holistic picture behind Chai Khana's role as a platform, it is important to include three methods to assist this study in providing a comprehensive analysis and, eventually, answering research questions. In qualitative research, where the validity needs to be cross-examined, this technique is crucial (Campbell and Fiske, 1959, p. 81).

In their experience, O'Donogh and Punch, for example, used this approach to spot the similarities and differences through data collection (2003, p. 81). Triangulation can assist the researcher in confirming the findings. This is achieved by verifying that individual values, if they do not agree with each other, at least do not contradict (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 266). This technique has also been described as essential in the quality control of empirical research by Jensen. Thus, the triangulation strategy is preferred by many social scientists (Jensen, 2002).

It is important to understand the context, intention, and case to provide a thorough research on Chai Khana. Therefore, triangulation will combine visual, textual, and interview methods. Each of these methods will provide separate input to this study.

Including visual methods in the analysis is crucial as images have been more influential in scientific knowledge, even more than texts (Stafford, 1993), and the limited framework for studying the visuals has made it difficult to study this medium scientifically (Hansen and Machin, 2013, p. 174). Since the Chai Khana stories include photos and texts that complement the visual, adopting respective methods to study these mediums is crucial. Therefore, textual analysis will be used to study the subject further. One of the influential scholars in this field, Udo Kuckartz, highlights the importance of textual analysis because, despite the trending multimedia, texts still dominate the social sciences (2014, p. 2) and can complement the other methods to understand the phenomenon.

In addition to the methods mentioned above, since this study is media production research, it is crucial to include the qualitative research interview of an “elite expert” as a framework for data collection (Bruun, 2016, p. 132). Further description of each method will better explain how the empirical data was collected.

While adopting a triangulation approach and including three methods for data collection, it is essential to mention that one of the methods will dominate during the study. The interview method will dominate throughout the analysis as this study is media production research. Since the research questions are directly related to the activities of the media platform, the data collected while interviewing “elite experts” is valuable to understand how Chai Khana operates.

Qualitative interviews

In this case study, it is important to understand how artists find their subjects and how they create trust with them to produce together. These kinds of interviews are called “elite expert interviewing” by Bruun, and answers to the questions provide additional information expressed by the artists and contributors (2016, p. 132). The reason for these interviews to be called as such is the goal of the interview, which is “understanding the practices and values,” as stated by Bruun. Interviewing the “elite expert” presents not only the understanding of the power the interviewee plays in the context but also their expertise. Additionally, in the case of this study,

interviewees are also the ones to experience inequality. Hence, this approach provided a look at the picture behind the scenes, which is the decision and story-making part of Chai Khana. Interviewing three artists and the executive director of the platform provided a deeper insight into media production (p. 134). While interviewing the contributors offered a broader knowledge of their production methods, the interview with the executive director provided knowledge of the driving mechanism behind the platform. The latter can be categorized as an “exclusive informant,” mentioned by Bruun (p. 134). These types of informants are involved in the study to understand media production in a broader sense, providing a wholesome picture of how the media platform is formed in the case of Chai Khana. The purpose of interviewing the exclusive informant relies on the desire to access specific information that other knowledge cannot replace. This quality makes the “exclusive informant” irreplaceable.

The interviews were semi-structured, an approachable method that allows one to get responses and observe the respondents (Bazeley, 2013). Conducting the interviews provided an artist’s way of expressing pain and hardships. The interview questions were designed and structured in a way to take out maximum results from the process. In addition, further to Bazeley, semi-structured interviews assisted the researcher during the interviews to be more responsive and reflective toward the responses provided by the participants (2013).

The interviewees were contributors whose contribution to Chai Khana has been semiotically analysed, and the Executive Director of the platform, Lika Antadze. The contributors are:

- Sharaf Naghiyeva, the author of “Alone, but liberated”
- Salome Kinkladze, the author of “Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry”
- Tati Sattar, the author of “Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations”

The interviews were conducted through video calls which were recorded all the time. Before the interview, all the respondents were briefed on the topic of the thesis, and they were asked to sign a consent form informing them that the interview would be recorded. Afterward, the interviews were transcribed. Since one of the contributors asked to be interviewed in their mother tongue, Azerbaijani, also the first language of this thesis’s author, the transcription was translated into English. Consequently, to categorise data and detect the patterns, transcriptions were coded and the coded material, along with the one transcription as a sample, consent form example, and interview questions, is included as an appendix at the end of this thesis. Further to the consent of the interviewees, their full names are disclosed.

Visual analysis

Photography and video content posted on Chai Khana's channels are examples of the documentary. On social media, viewers build a bond with the survivor's journey as if it is the same experience or resembling one of their own. It is achieved through the impact of popular culture (Hermes, 2005, p. 10). The first-ever encounter of the audience with the visual is crucial as it establishes the roots of what people can see (Berger, 2008, p. 23). Contrary to what people view as the product of an artist's recreation, Berger argues that what viewers see represents societal values and norms, personal taste, and their previous experience (p. 11).

Studying the visuals in media is crucial as they were given secondary significance in the previous studies, which Corner sees as a limitation (2011, p. 49). Hence, Hansen and Machin criticize the lack of a clear, strict framework for studying visuals (2013, p. 174). In that case, semiotic analysis can be central to understanding the relationship between individual consciousness and the socio-political order (Corner, 2011, p. 51). Therefore, three visuals were semiotically analyzed and interpreted based on the symbols and signs that belong to a community (D'Alleva, 2005, p. 28).

The reasoning behind choosing images is tightly related to this study's research questions and objectives, further to Rose's recommendation (2016, p. 62), who also sees semiotics as a powerful tool providing analytical precision (p. 75). Referring to the role signs play a role in interpreting an image, the scholar draws attention to how ideology plays a role in the interpretation. While clarifying how to approach the ideology, referring to various scholars, she mentions Hall, advising to look for "social life," "economical," and "political power" in the connotative meaning of visuals (p. 95).

Ideology is crucial in the case study of Chai Khana stories. It might be a term that sounds negative, but upon deeper analysis, it demonstrates how certain beliefs and ideas shape our journey in the world. Hence, Howells and Negreiros believe that ideology is quite a complex concept (2003, p. 71). As Corner's explanation of photography is worth mentioning, claiming its muted nature and static power as this might provide in-depth interpretability (2011, p. 181), visual analysis was an essential part of the study.

The semiotic analysis and the photos chosen to be studied are included in the appendices section of the thesis. It is also worth noting that the captions of these visuals were not analysed as they were not relevant to the photo itself but rather complimentary to the story.

Textual Analysis

When referring to textual expression, Dahlgren mentions its drifting role due to the abundance of available media (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 102). Nevertheless, he mentions how critical thinking has been developed over the years to support textual analysis in the political context (p. 152). Kuckartz, on the other hand, provides another account when it comes to analysing the texts mentioning that due to the dominating quantity of texts, it still remains an important content to be analysed for the provision of the context (2014, p. 2).

In Chai Khana stories, text plays an important role as they complement the photo report creating a narrative telling about protagonists. Today's textual analysis mainly relies on hermeneutical traditions, and it is often referred to as the "non-reactive method." In fact, it is non-reactive as the analysis does not affect the existing content. But it is important to understand that data should not be limited to content analysis, and the researchers combine it with the data gathered from interviews (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 32). Hence, the transcribed interviews of the Executive Director and contributors of Chai Khana will be analysed by textual approach.

Two methods were adopted to choose and analyse the text: Hermeneutics and Grounded theory. Hermeneutics is the framework of interpretation that approaches the text analysis from the ideological point of view, whereas the Grounded theory develops the theories while analysing the data systematically (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 16). Since the context is crucial in the case analyses of Chai Khana, Hermeneutics provided a deeper examination by taking into account the cultural background. While adopting this method, five rules were followed (p. 18-21):

- Understanding the context of the text generation and the conditions under which that content was created;
- Reading through texts of the stories and the interview several times to develop a better understanding of each part separately and as a whole;
- Being aware of the cultural language involved in the production of the text;
- Outlining the main ideas before the analysis of the text in order not to deviate from the objectives of the research;

- Separating the discovery from the application by identifying new information and theory while analysing the text.

Since the methods used in this study were open, the Grounded theory helped to provide flexibility to develop new concepts and theories while gathering data from interviews and the rest of the sources. This offered an opportunity to identify new insights while systematically comparing the data, especially the one collected during the qualitative analysis. To achieve this, three types of coding were used in sequence to analyse the content (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 23-26):

- Open coding: Provides the introduction to analysis by allowing the use of categorisation based on the preliminary concepts and theories;
- Axial coding: Creates connections between the codes identified during open coding looking for patterns and relationships in the data;
- Selective coding: Identifies a core category linking various codes and patterns identified during the open and axial coding processes, thus, providing answers to the research questions.

Grounded theory provided a clear procedure for coding the data gathered during the interviews and the textual materials to be used to answer the research questions and ensure the quality of the conducted research.

The coding for this study was based on a bottom-up approach. All the transcriptions and all three stories of the authors participating in the research were read several times and coded accordingly. Later on, these codes were categorised and themed, respectively. Categories and themes for interview transcriptions and stories published on Chai Khana are separate. The coding was conducted in this direction to avoid overlooking new arguments that might emerge during the study.

Analysis

This section is divided into three parts and explores the city of Tbilisi, gender-related topics in the South Caucasus, and Chai Khana's role and importance in creating the stories from the region.

The first part explains how the Chai Khana office, being based in Tbilisi, makes sense and how the city provides a space for practising storytelling. This part dives into various aspects of the city based on the responses of four interviewees: Firstly, in terms of inclusivity, Tbilisi has much more diversity. Of course, this resonates with the powerful imagery Georgiou mentions (2013, p. 22), and the reality might present a totally different picture, as mentioned during the interview with the Executive Director of Chai Khana, Lika Antadze. Secondly, Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia, a country in the South Caucasus that is ranked higher for its freedom of speech in comparison to other South Caucasus countries. Freedom of speech is essential in this context as it allows independent media organisations such as Chai Khana to publish stories that might be against the traditional norms and values or challenge the political situation in the region. Thirdly, Tbilisi has a lot to offer in terms of creative communities, which is essential in media practices. Therefore, the city hosts most of the media organisations in Georgia and some of the regional media offices.

The second part of the analysis focuses on the current situation of gender roles and problems in the region. These hardships include the socioeconomic situation of women and queer communities, their daily challenges, and the suppression of their human rights. While discussing all of these with the interviewees, the stories chosen for further analysis provide a better understanding of the lives of the Chai Khana protagonists. Moreover, the analysis will dwell on the reasons why Chai Khana highlights the gender topics from the region broadly and how the contributors working and collaborating with the platform approach gender-related stories.

The last part examines the media platform itself. Cross-referencing the data collected from the interviews, stories, and visuals provides a detailed account of story-making by Chai Khana. Additionally, this section will explore further how the platform chooses the stories to be published and what kind of resources it offers for the contributors to provide a well-detailed and solid piece. Although Chai Khana is an independent media platform, it still works based on the best practices of journalism, trying to tell the stories without any manipulation, further to the Executive Director's response. In that case, it is also important to provide a study of how Chai Khana contributes to the overall media practices of the region. Additionally, the last part will focus on the protagonists and Chai Khana's contributors.

It is important to understand how the contributors find the stories and what is the bond between them and their protagonists. While discussing their working process, the contributors

interviewed for this study mentioned the bond they were making with their protagonists. At this point, the question arises if there is a bond between the contributors and the protagonists; how does this affect the story's objectivity? This is also the part when social imaginary and cultural citizenship will be discussed while explaining the working process and the impact these stories might have on the audience. Chai Khana's further support in the story-making will provide a better understanding of the relations among the platform, contributors, and protagonists.

Media city

To provide a more comprehensive view of how Tbilisi hosts an independent media organisation, in this case, Chai Khana, Lefebvre's concepts of the city were adopted as a framework for this part. Those concepts are spatial, imagined, and reality (1991).

Tbilisi is considered to be a city with a rich cultural and artistic legacy. This might be because of its history as an administrative centre for the South Caucasus region. This part of the Caucasus combined political influence and economic resources, uniting the combination of multiple cultural affiliations. Nevertheless, this is being challenged by the interviewees of the study.

Of course, there is a generational difference in terms of how the city is imagined, and it should be considered a normal process due to the changing nature of the imagined city. The imagined city is a dynamic concept as the symbolic representations are changed through various media and cultural practices. Tbilisi's political importance has been replaced with a neutral one for the region in the Post-Soviet period. Today, it is considered an important creative hub, further to Tati Sattar's elaboration on the photography community in Tbilisi.

Lika Antadze, Executive Director of the platform, has a more practical view of the office location. Highlighting its importance of providing a safe and physical space for all the contributors to meet occasionally but later backing this up with the freedom of speech as well, which was also confirmed by Sharaf Naghiyeva.

Historically important, politically neutral and unstable

It was an intentional decision to focus on Tbilisi and its role in the formation of Chai Khana. It has historical importance for the region as it always offered a space to bring together all three countries considering Tbilisi's role as the administrative centre for The Caucasian Viceroyalty and Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic.

Nowadays, the political importance of the city has not been eradicated. It is still an important political hub where many regionally important events take place. Hence, the office of Chai Khana is located in Tbilisi. It is the only city in the region of the South Caucasus providing a physical space for hosting the contributors and management of the media platform and the exhibitions, workshops, and other physical events organized by Chai Khana. When asked about the reasons behind choosing the location, the Executive Director of the platform, Lika Antadze, referred to the political situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan¹, "It is still is a hub for us where we could meet physically."

The political situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan shifted the importance of Tbilisi in the region. Once again, Tbilisi has become an important regional centre, this time for communication between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Because of the closed borders between the two countries, Tbilisi became a crucial exchange point for people and information between both countries. This opportunity armed the city with a strategic advantage as a mediator. Furthermore, it served as a means of introducing a social and economic structure of the city in a way that can be a centre in a specific area (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 151). In the case of this study, it played a role in hosting a cross-border media platform – Chai Khana.

It seems like this role of a mediator city will not eradicate, at least in the near future. Antadze mentioned the region's instability, drawing attention to the constant military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan that have been shifted to a new level since 2020 and have not been calming down since then. Moreover, she mentioned the long-time occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose destiny has not been resolved. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not made it easier on the region. Following the launch of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the political situation in the conflict zone has shifted toward annexation of South Ossetia to Russia. Considering the military conflicts, Antadze did not sound very

¹ Originating in the 1980s and escalating into a war in the early 1990s, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues today. Due to the conflict, both countries have closed their borders forbidding travel for both sides.

optimistic when addressing the future. “We're directly tied, the region is directly tied to the current development in Ukraine as well. So It's very chaotic right now. And yeah, I don't know, it's not the best situation.”

Creative media infrastructure

Tbilisi does not offer the same abundance and lavishness in terms of media infrastructure as much as Baku, the capital of neighbouring Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Tbilisi has substantial media infrastructure in terms of institutions, art collectives, and academic programs.

Tbilisi's media infrastructure lets it be a global space for media production and shapes it into a cosmopolitan place of production (Georgiou, 2013, p. 33) where diversity is welcomed. This characteristic, in its turn, attracts media professionals, investors, and tourists to explore the city's production and cultural capacity. When asked about why Chai Khana's office is located in Tbilisi, unsurprisingly, Salome Kinkladze responded without hesitation, “I think that the office, of course, like every media office, are located in Tbilisi.”

The city is known for its regionally acclaimed university, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA), an institution with the Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management, which is popular among media professionals from the region. The variety of art-related programs offered by the school prepares future media practitioners. In fact, Lika Antadze mentioned that two out of the three founders of Chai Khana, Lala Alieva and Nvard Hovhannisyan, are alumni of GIPA. The third founder was Caroline Sutcliffe from the US, Hawaii. “As strangely it might sound,” added Antadze during the interview when seeing the interviewer's surprised facial expression. Further to Antadze's explanation, Sutcliffe worked in Azerbaijan and explored the region. Based on this, it is possible to assume that Chai Khana's office being based in Tbilisi was a well-thought decision.

Tbilisi has a sufficiently solid creative and media base for hosting cross-border media platforms, including Chai Khana. As Tati Sattar, a photographer from Azerbaijan, puts it, Baku does not have photography curators, whereas in Tbilisi, there is an opposite situation; they have a stronger photography community:

“In general, those from the photo community have their own communities there. Several times, other friends of mine have also travelled there, and I

have witnessed from their stories (Instagram) that such photographers can gather and work together.”

Sattar’s second exhibition was held in Tbilisi, and Chai Khana supported the photographer in organising the event. Sharaf Naghiyeva, another photographer from Azerbaijan, has also been exhibited in Tbilisi in collaboration with Kolga – a photography institution also based in the city.

In such a creatively thriving environment, it is possible to assume that media production is possible by large-scale organizations and small, ethnic, and other community media (Georgiou, 2013, p. 33), including LGBTQI+.

Diverse communities

Tbilisi’s geographical location and historical role as an administrative unit created an environment for the practice of multiculturalism. Even today, the city is home to many Azerbaijanis, Turks, and Armenians. Tbilisi also provides a safer environment for the LGBTQI+ community in a culturally diverse city.

Pari Banu, the protagonist of Sharaf Naghiyeva’s “Alone, but liberated” project, a transgender woman, decided to move to Tbilisi to escape Baku. She wanted to escape the oppression in her hometown and search for a better life with opportunities to be involved in the artistic community of Tbilisi, as mentioned in the published story, “She planned to leave her parents’ house and move to Tbilisi in neighboring Georgia where she hoped no one would pressure her just because of who she is.”

Tbilisi does offer better opportunities for queer people, as there have been more active art communities in the past year. Artists, photographers, and even filmmakers are involved in creating a fresher look at the queer communities through their creative lenses – something Stevenson recognises as cultural citizenship (2001, p. 3).

The practice of cultural citizenship does not happen accidentally or spontaneously. There is a more organised approach to that, at least in Chai Khana’s case. As Sharaf Naghiyeva mentioned during the interview, her visit to Tbilisi was related to the workshop on how to work with the LGBTQI+ community, which tells about the intentional and careful approach to the topic.

Lika Antadze, the Executive Director of Chai Khana, when talking about the safety in Tbilisi, mentioned that the city might offer a safer space when compared to Baku but acknowledged that Tbilisi is not that progressive either, commenting on Pari Banu's relocation to Tbilisi, "But I also couldn't fully understand because we also have quite radical nationalist groups were homophobic, and who are quite dangerous."

Further to Antadze's comment, this is a hands-on case when the imagined city is replaced by lived city, and opposing reality of one's life and choices to the one the public life offers (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 362). The comparison of the imagined city and lived city is well-reflected in the photo of Pari Banu shot by Sharaf Naghiyeva, where the city's background highlights the low socioeconomic life in Tbilisi, opposite of the imagined richness and cultural life.

What happened to Pari Banu after she moved to Tbilisi is a clear glimpse of reality. She was attacked by two young men on the outskirts of Tbilisi, where she lived during the period. Hence, she decided to look for an apartment near the city centre. Based on her story published by Chai Khana, Banu changed her address three times since moving to Tbilisi and finally found a place where the landlord was welcoming and friendly. Nevertheless, this also does not guarantee safety. Further to her story published by Chai Khana, she was also confronted by Azerbaijani women who were unhappy with her being a transgender woman.

Photo by Sharaf Naghiyeva from "Alone, but liberated"



Apart from all the difficulties that Pari Banu faced in Tbilisi, she was also presented with the opportunity to perform in a club and work in a gallery, although this did not provide her with financial security. Nevertheless, the prospect of being involved in the artistic community gave her the inspiration to find her calling as she also started to research fellowships and look for modelling opportunities.

Sharaf Naghiyeva started taking photos of Banu back in Baku and took the journey with her to Tbilisi when she also decided to relocate to the city, where she continued taking photos of Banu. When asked about Tbilisi, Naghiyeva's statement, "And I really feel different here. Like completely here. I feel more free. I feel more power," offered another direction to explore the question concerning why Chai Khana is based in Tbilisi.

Freedom of speech

Georgia has higher rankings among the world countries when compared to Armenia and Azerbaijan for practising freedom of speech, which lays the ground for an independent media platform such as Chai Khana to focus on the region's issues.

Not surprisingly, Sharaf Naghiyeva, when commenting on the location of the Chai Khana office, highlights the importance of freedom of speech, "I think Chai Khana being based in

Tbilisi makes it more free, makes it more independent.” Having independent media offers an environment for including diverse topics and communities (Taylor, 1994). Thus, it is quite understandable why Tbilisi is more diverse and inclusive regarding the LGBTQI+ community.

The media in the region does not represent their voices; as a result of which, these communities have been subjected to stereotypes and persecution as there is no gender fluidity or roles that are beyond the conventionally assigned ones. Any coverage that might be displayed by the media is linked to abnormal behaviour, consequently creating stereotypes about those who do not identify with their socially prescribed gender expectations. The representatives of the LGBTQI+ community are mostly associated with sex work and low life in the traditional media; consequently, the attitude toward them is negative. One simple example could be the behaviour Pari Banu faced from her mother, mentioned in “Alone, but liberated”, “She said that I need treatment for my strange behaviour.” Lack of visibility in the mainstream media negatively impacts the queer community and subjects the community to otherness (Richardson, 2001, p. 157).

Lika Antadze, when addressing the question about Tbilisi, mentioned the importance of free speech as well. Nevertheless, she also highlighted the instability of the region: the War in Ukraine and the Russian impact on the region's politics. Accordingly, this situation is not playing well with civil organisations and the independent media. Thousands of protesters marched in the streets of Tbilisi to fight the government’s attempt to approve a bill for “foreign agents” in March 2023 (Kirby, 2023), and the interviewees of this study, currently living in the city, joined the demonstrations.

Commenting on the situation and protests, Lika Antadze highlighted the importance of fighting for freedom of speech and civil organisations, “And obviously, eventually, it would have liked to the disappearance of civil society, independent media, because we all know how this law played out in Russia.”

“Foreign agents” law in Russia focused on spotlighting all the media and civil organisations not supported by state and municipal entities and labelled them as foreign agents in case they received funding from outside of the country. Consequently, independent organisations ceased to exist in Russia, making all the news outlets represent the government’s views.

Instability in the region affects Chai Khana operations as well. Firstly, it creates difficulties in terms of finances. Antadze mentioned the difficulties Chai Khana faces due to limited resources. The situation with Ukraine changed the overall priority of the region in terms of

funding; hence, the Executive Director, who is responsible for the funding activities, is struggling to get financial support from donors, "...the fundraising is becoming quite hard and the key resources, we don't know whether we, we are able to continue until the end of the year to continue our key activities." Being in constant survival mode, trying to keep the organisation going makes it hard to plan for the long-term period.

"The second challenge is that now the government is doing a crash down on independent media," added Antadze. This means that even if they find funding, they are not sure if the government will not come after them. Hence, this creates uncertainty regarding the sustainable existence of independent media organisations such as Chai Khana.

Gender in South Caucasus

While discussing Chai Khana's contribution to the region of the South Caucasus, Lika Antadze mentions the importance of historical context as this provides knowledge of how gender was shaped in the South Caucasus. To give a brief explanation of gender relations, in the South Caucasus, women are mostly invisible in regard to their contribution to society and the economy, whereas pushing the boundaries of strictly assigned gender identity is immediately put in the spotlight, creating resentment and, in most cases, a danger for those in question.

Socially constructed gender roles are challenged seldomly, and there is a huge gap in the generational approach to this topic. One clear example of that is reflected in Tati Sattar's story on Novruz² celebrations when 20 years old woman questions the norms of Novruz, "Amina, 20, is loath to perpetuate some parts of the tradition, especially the fact that the women do all the work," And is faced by her grandmother's confusion. Hence, it is important to take into account that looking at the gender relations for this region from one spectacle is undesirable (Harding, 2008, p.113) as this excludes the generational, socioeconomic, and geographical location as well. Further to Tati Sattar's interview, it was highlighted that there is a big difference in women's assigned roles in rural and urban spaces. One example focuses on a woman living in a rural part of Azerbaijan and how her daily responsibilities include working as a teacher, running a bed and breakfast business, and managing the household while cleaning everything without the help of home appliances. The other example shows how difficult it is

² Novruz is a spring holiday celebrated in Central Asia and Middle East countries. It is often a celebration of New Year as it marks the beginning of spring and awakening nature. The preparations for the holiday require a lot of time as per the tradition; each household has to have custom sweets and treats.

to work with women in rural areas to be photographed by her as she needed to get their husbands' permission. Thus, it is essential to consider these perspectives to provide a clearer view of women's role and oppression of their rights in the region.

Visible and invisible people

During the Soviet period, women were allowed to participate in the working sphere as there was a need for a labour-power. Many plants and factories needed the resources to support production. Hence, labour provided by women was essential in Soviet countries. In terms of the economic situation, when the region shifted toward a free-market economy, many women lost their secure jobs in government institutions and government-run organisations as a result of privatisation. So, it is predictable how life has changed for the protagonist of Salome Kinkladze, 67 years old Lili, an economist by profession, now selling fish for little income in Georgia. Like thousands of other women in her country and the South Caucasus, she had to adapt to the new economic market, which is quoted in the story published by Chai Khana, *"Times change, everything changes, and I change too. Then you have to find some solution so you do not die of hunger."*

The post-Soviet period was chaotic; the hardships women had to carry before the system's collapse did not ease. Today, a woman is not only the caretaker of the houses, but she also supports the family in financial terms. The economic situation does not provide stability for the people living in this region, especially for women. The following excerpt from the story by Tati Sattar sheds light on the living of one Azerbaijani woman in a rural area of the country:

"Families preserve the region's traditions, including special customs and sweets made just for Novruz. For Zulfiyya Aliyeva, 49, that means hours of work in addition to her job as an English teacher at the local high school and the family farm and small bed and breakfast."

In this case, a woman is not only the lady of the house but also the provider. In a society where traditionally, men are breadwinners and women are the caretakers, financial contribution to the family does not ease women's hardships.



Photo by Tati Sattar from "Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations"

Traditional gender roles are highlighted in the photo shot by Tati Sattar compliments the story. A man holds the light for the woman while she is making a holiday treat. The photo depicting the darkness resulting from the power cut is a mere provider of context about the difficulties of women living in the region. "But there is something very strange that they are not aware of it," mentioned Tati Sattar during the interview right after sharing her impression of the women's difficult life in Azerbaijan.

Indeed it seems like women are not aware of the disadvantageous position they have been put as the following piece from the story about women in the fishing industry by Salome Kinkladze suggests,

"When men catch fish, they probably get paid a lot more, and they catch a lot of fish. However, they work in groups and have to share their income. And their wage is what?! They have so many expenses!"

This comes from the same woman who earns a man's yearly income in three years. It seems like women came to terms with their socially constructed role in society; as a sentence from Tati Sattar's story on Novruz claims, "Raziya notes that life has been like this "since we first opened our eyes."

Nevertheless, these terms are not accepted by everyone, a clear example of which can be detected in the same published story by Tati Sattar, where the author questions this normative trying to find justice for her mother's valuable input and labour before Novruz celebration,

“This is in addition to her normal cleaning and cooking, and the entire process has always struck me as unfair: why should the burden of these holiday feasts fall on her?”

In a society where modernity is achieved, self-identity and flexibility of choice are unavoidable (Gauntlett, 2008, p.105). This argument, naturally, offers an assumption that modernity has not been achieved in the South Caucasus. Nonetheless, the generational gap and ideologies have already started clashing. A simple example of this contrast can be detected in the conversations of Tati Sattar’s protagonists in the story about Novruz: a 20 years old woman is reluctant to maintain the traditional Novruz holiday preparations, hinting that women do all the hard work, whereas, in contrast, a 58-year-old housewife who does not see any other option for a woman. Although tired, the woman mentions that there is no other life for women, hoping that her granddaughter will follow in her footsteps.

The contribution of women to the household and economy is not visible, whereas pushing the traditionally assigned gender roles in society results in pushing the limits of what is visible to the eye. In the case of Pari Banu, a transgender woman from Azerbaijan, the protagonist of Sharaf Naghiyeva’s “Alone, but liberated” suffocates from the exclusion by her family and strangers as her image irritates others, as mentioned in the story, “She said that it was really a struggle to live in a society where even the colour of your trousers, or wearing earrings can be a trigger for others.”

When it comes to socially constructed gender roles, the South Caucasus offers a disparity in terms of what is visible and what is not. On the one hand, there is a clear invisibility that women are treated with in terms of their contribution to the household and economy; on the other hand, pushing the boundaries of the gender normative for the region results in being overly visible and, consequently, results in marginalisation. Further to the published story, Pari Banu’s father attacked her with a knife for the green shopping bag with the writing “she/they” pronouns.

In the case of Pari Banu, a small detail, such as a floral tote bag, is enough reason to result in danger. As highlighted in the “Alone, but liberated” story, in Azerbaijan, being out of the box regarding the topic of gender is a hardship in itself. Nevertheless, this is the case in other South Caucasus countries as well.

The photo shot by Sharaf Naghiyeva and analysed for this case study implies it clearly as an older woman in the background is staring at Pari Banu walking in the streets of Tbilisi. Pari Banu is wearing a pink top in the photo, and compared to the neutral background of an assumingly low-income neighbourhood, she stands out with a somehow “flamboyant” looking

style. Thus, it is possible to observe that she gets extra “attention,” as seen in the photo where a woman in the background turns around, starting at Pari Banu.

While discussing how she met Pari Banu, Sharaf Naghiyeva mentioned that her future protagonist lived in “Razino”³, a settlement of Baku known as one of the conservative places to live. This has made Pari Banu’s life even more difficult, and as a result of which, she decided to relocate to Georgia. Nevertheless, as the plotline of “Alone, but liberated” tells the audiences, living in an isolated part of Tbilisi, Pari Banu was again attacked by the local people. Furthermore, she tried to change her address, “She is looking for an apartment closer to the city center, because it seems safer to her and she thinks that people in central neighborhoods are less homophobic,” says in her story published by Chai Khana.

This demonstrates how socioeconomic status and living areas are also essential to understanding gender relations in the South Caucasus. The mere reflection in Pari Banu’s photo is proof of that, as she looks vivid in the neutral background of the photo. The more remote the location from the centre, where the economic resources, opportunities for growth, and services are abundant, the harsher gender-assigned roles. Consequently, it is possible to assume that people living outside the capital city have limited resources and opportunities for better living standards.

The fish-selling woman depicted in the photo by Salome Kinkladze validates this argument. In the photo, the woman holds on to boxes with fish and other sea products. This interaction

³ “Razino” is the old name of the Bakikhanov settlement in Baku, settled by a low-income and conservative population. Although it has been renamed since the fall of the USSR, the settlement is still known by its old name.



Photo by Salome Kinkladze from "Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry"

between the woman and the fish boxes highlights their relation. Someone might see only sea products, whereas for the woman, they are her only source of income, her means of survival.

Moreover, rural spaces provide a much more segregated environment, as women are not allowed in public life, and communal spaces such as cafes and restaurants are considered for men only. Historically, these places have influenced decision-making and political and social agenda-sharing. Hence, it is possible to conclude that women's absence from these spaces plays a significant role in their under-representation and discrimination in the community. As Lika Antadze, the Executive Director of Chai Khana puts it:

"And obviously, the reason is that's the region is... All the narratives in the region are male-dominated, right? The men-shaped politics, men-shaped, I don't know, culture, men-shaped education, men-shaped, all the levels of social life in the region and that's why it was important to bring this aspect really in the front line."

Taking over male-dominated spaces

"Well, let's start from the name itself, "Why Chai Khana?" Lika Antadze replied without hesitation to answer the question about how important Chai Khana's role is in addressing gender-related challenges.

Chai Khana, a common name for tea houses in the South Caucasus, refers to common social spaces for men and their discussions. These conversations are primarily influential in building

the mentality of the community. Thus, Lika Antadze mentions that life is men-shaped in the region. Hence, the name Chai Khana for a media platform was selected with the intention to claim this social space from men and start discussing the topics of the region that are not covered by mainstream media.

The South Caucasus has a lot to offer in terms of stories to be heard, which previously were and still are ignored by the mainstream media. Hence, during the interview, the Executive Director of Chai Khana referred to the fact that their team consists of only women, and most of the stories are also told by women, bringing forward a female perspective. This is an attempt to take over a male-dominated space and restructure it to achieve justice and accomplishment for those whose rights have been oppressed and whose voices have been suppressed, in other words, forming cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 2001).

Consequently, a new form of citizenship is formed through online media platforms. Contributors of Chai Khana join this activism because of their own experiences and hardships. Therefore, they choose characters with stories resonating with their own. As Tati Sattar explains it, “If the things that I experience and feel happen to other people, I target them and photograph them because I feel very comfortable with the questions I will ask them.”

Having mutual experiences and understanding of the protagonists allows the contributors to create stories that also strike a chord with the audience. The shared experiences, practices, and stories have the ability to unite people. In other words, contributors, protagonists, and audiences of Chai Khana experience closeness, a unity that makes them feel connected, which is described as social imaginary in media sciences (Taylor, 2004, p. 227). Accordingly, a reader of Chai Khana from the South Caucasus might find a reflection of their hardships in the platform’s stories. Lika Antadze said about the private messages Chai Khana social media accounts receive, “In private messages, we very often receive positive comments that they found out about the platform and that it's very encouraging, especially from our authors that it was important for them to cover this specific story.” She also mentioned that this gratefulness of the authors might be because of their personal ties to the story or long-time desire to cover the story for which they are glad to have this platform.

Apart from all the positive messages, Lika Antadze mentioned the negative comments, especially concerning LGBTQI+-related topics: “Sometimes there are very constructive and good discussions on social media. But I've heard the cases were, for example, author was threatened or I don't know... The protagonist was threatened.” In order not to put the authors

and their protagonists in danger, they choose to publish the stories anonymously or cover the face of the protagonist.

Difficulties as such and support to the authors and their protagonists happen through mutual empathy and support, which is also a showcase of social imaginary (Taylor, 1994, p. 227). So far, Chai Khana stories grant a deeper look at the lives of the invisible, especially the women and LGBTQI+ community in the South Caucasus, by highlighting their hardships and suffering. Consequently, the platform promotes resistance toward the existing social norms and traditional mentality in the region, and the Executive Director of the platform elaborated on it. Further to her response, it was stated that Chai Khana does not do advocacy work or fight for policy change. However, the media platform allows others to rethink the current situation and reflect on the political agenda accordingly.

Media and participation

Chai Khana's earlier mentioned attempt to take over the male-shaped social and political spaces is such a collective determination. Women who have been living outside of the social and political agenda, whose rights have been oppressed, decided to take over the spaces where thinking was shaped by men. Hence, a claim over these spaces is a collective action important to drive social change. Burr (1995, p.76) mentions that collectiveness is important in driving social change. Consequently, Chai Khana's position as a platform for women by women aligns with the collective action Burr mentions.

Chai Khana publishes stories that have not been addressed by the mainstream media, which means that it is not of interest to the social-political agenda of the region. Hence, this is evaluated as an attempt to voice the challenges. Voice is crucial for public representation (Couldry, 2010). Since women and queer communities are not being heard, this leaves them outside of public life, which makes their status and hardships linger further on. In light of this, Chai Khana takes on the responsibility to voice gender-related topics and highlight this in a way that remarkably creates a resonance with the personal stories of the South Caucasus people. This section of the analysis focuses on exploring how this is achieved through storytelling.

Cross-border media platform

Chai Khana is mainly an online platform, and it is possible that the internet helps it to be more efficient in reaching out to a larger audience and gaining more followers. This allows the media platform to use the internet for more than reaching audiences as the empowering power of the internet provides a ground to connect, collaborate and empower (Gauntlett, 2007). Although the Executive Director, Lika Antadze, mentioned hosting occasional offline gatherings and events, their operations are mainly based on the internet.

While interviewing the Executive Director and the authors of respective projects analysed for this thesis, it was identified that all of them were introduced to Chai Khana through their network – friends and peers. When addressing the question of how she first learned about Chai Khana, Salome Kinkladze mentioned the “bubble,” a network of same-minded people who are well aware of the media organisations in the country. Tati Sattar has followed the platform since its establishment but was on the “radar” of Chai Khana after being referred to as a photographer by an unidentified person, “Someone sent my name there. I still don't know who sent it.” Sharaf Naghiyeva was introduced to Chai Khana by her ex-boyfriend, who also happened to be a photographer, and Lika Antadze, who worked at the publishing houses back then, learned about the opening of the Media Manager position from an acquaintance.

The very account of the above-mentioned people being introduced to the media platform is a demonstration of social imaginary, as they belong to a network of people sharing the same practices (Taylor, 1994, p. 159). Although Chai Khana focuses on the stories from the South Caucasus region and their contributors are spread worldwide, their social imaginary brings them together.

“Chai Khana is a cross-border platform,” shortly defines Lika Antadze. This aspect is important to consider as the platform has contributors from around the globe and readers from around the world. According to Antadze, this is how the people engaging with Chai Khana can see themselves and their position beyond their own context. Thus, it makes identifying oneself easier as one can understand their position. Antadze explained, “Like this idea of seeing yourself and your position beyond your context, really helps you to identify where you stand.”

In the stories published by Chai Khana, it is possible to detect the similarities in the people's sufferings and their resilience. Regardless of their country of origin, readers of the same region create a social imaginary by identifying with these hardships and, as Lika Antadze puts it, see themselves beyond their own standing point.

Being a voice of the South Caucasus is important as stories need to be told. Sharaf Naghiyeva confirms this when answering why she wants to collaborate with Chai Khana, “Because they are the only platform which is telling stories from the South Caucasus. And making it interesting with artistic approach but still as documentary.”

This is a space where experiences and knowledge are exchanged and has an inclusive character. Forming a zone like that is vital for modern societies to cultivate a sense of respect for each other and create the core of democratic institutions (Taylor, 2006).

Salome Kinkladze agrees with Chai Khana's role in bringing the audience closer. She mentioned that while engaging with a story, one might look at the protagonist the way they look into the mirror to see their reflection. This creates a bond, a sense of empathy, and a sense of responsibility, as in the case of her story about women in the fishing industry. After getting acquainted with the story of these women, the audience would comment on social media, trying to find these women and offer help. Engagement of the audience in actions to support is how cultural citizenship is formed.

Sharaf Naghiyeva feels that the stories (published in Chai Khana) are important for two reasons. First, by making stories that trigger people, negative or positive. Once a person is engaged with a story, they might explore it further, widening their outlook. Secondly, by seeing brave and resilient people, others might feel empowered by their courage.

Considering that the region lacks stories regarding gender-related hardships and challenges of queer communities, the stories of Chai Khana can provide a basis for social change. Salome Kinkladze also believes in these stories' power and ability to result in social impact: "But in long term, yeah. In short term, these changes are related to liberation of people who talk.”

Collective efforts of authors from the region provide a basis for social imaginary and cultural citizenship in all three countries, which makes it a cross-border media platform pushing the issues of unheard and oppressed to the front not only for the region but also for the global audiences.

Pushing the boundaries of storytelling

“Initially, Chai Khana was set up as a mentoring platform,” said Lika Antadze. They were looking for young journalists or students majoring in journalism to guide them, “It is still oriented on beginners because we do not want to give up that.”

Chai Khana’s approach to storytelling allows the authors to experiment with new formats and explore new sides to creating narratives. Further to Lika Antadze, this is done because they do not want straightforward or linear narratives but to convey the important messages with the author’s own tone. Antadze added, “I guess because there were not many platforms that would allow authors to do that.”

Having authentic stories with the author's voice is what makes Chai Khana special, according to Salome Kinkladze. Kinkladze highlighted that she likes how the platform tries to limit the editing of texts to keep the story authentic and save – Salome’s tone in the written article making it authentic.

Sharaf Naghiyeva, a professional photographer, expressed her gratitude for being guided in organizing her photos into a consistent story. When asked why she considers continuing on working with Chai Khana, she mentioned, “Because they helped me a lot. In telling the stories both verbally and visually. I think that they are kind of taking me out from my comfort zone.” She added that through the collaboration with Chai Khana she started showing more interest in documentary photography.

Tati Sattar responded to the same question with several opportunities that Chai Khana offers, including but not limited to training, guidance, financial stipend, and projects for portfolio.

Lika Antadze did not forget to mention how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the platform. Before the pandemic, the platform regularly organised exhibitions and gatherings. Nevertheless, they started adopting more of an online format when the pandemic hit the world. The pandemic accelerated the platform's shift toward online operation. This became handy as the limited resources, one of the challenges of the media platform, do not allow to organise many physical meetings. Hence, the platform uses the internet space and offers online fellowships trying to reach more storytellers and making it easier for the participants as well to be a part of the fellowship.

In addition to being flexible in terms of space, Chai Khana also supports young photographers, filmmakers, and journalists from the South Caucasus to push the boundaries of storytelling.

Lika Antadze added, “We are running fellowships now. Once in every three months, for the beginner authors and it includes trainings and the sessions and guest speakers.”

Besides offering fellowships oriented at beginners, it also supports the contributors' creative aspirations. Salome Kinkladze, for example, mentioned her interest in photography but not being able to get a formal education in the subject. Nevertheless, Chai Khana allowed her to showcase her photography for the stories. With the honorarium she got for working on her latest story, she could afford to buy a camera which she plans to use for her future stories. Although the amount was symbolic and not enough to buy a camera, she noted in the interview, “Yeah, that's this camera belongs from my latest work... Is related to my latest work... which I, yeah, it was something very memorable.”

Chai Khana contributes to the creative and media ecosystem of the South Caucasus by providing opportunities for the contributor to push the boundaries of storytelling and actively engage in adding value to the community – thus, exercising cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 2001).

During the interview, Tati Sattar highlighted the support she got while working on her story “Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations.” Chai Khana introduced her to a gender researcher who would later guide her during the project as if trying to understand the protagonists' experiences and create a coherent story about them. Thus, connecting through social imaginary helps the contributors and readers build further narratives around their mutual experiences (Taylor, 1994, p. 159). Although it is possible that social imaginary is not obvious to all the interested parties as it is considered to be a part of a natural process (Taylor, 1994).

Character-driven stories

People most likely to be the protagonists of Chai Khana stories are the individuals like the contributors themselves. Tati Sattar brought up that seeing someone else going through the same experience as she makes it easier to photograph them as she feels comfortable asking questions and bonding with them through the same hardships (Taylor, 2004, p. 160).

Character-driven stories have been important for Chai Khana and are still crucial, added Lika Antadze to explain whose story will most likely be published by the platform. Furthermore, the Executive Director explained how important it is for the platform to highlight authentic stories that are not found in the mainstream media.

In fact, all three contributors highlighted the bonds with their protagonists, Sharaf Naghiyeva, who started working on Pari Banu's story in Baku and continued working with her in Tbilisi. During the interview, she mentioned that she is interested in LGBTQI+-related topics and wants to continue collaborating with Pari Banu. Salome Kinkladze referred to the fact that she is a feminist and searches for the topics that are relatable to her, "And it's often based on my experience and my knowledge and I try to mention about it, somehow."

Working with Chai Khana allows these contributors not only to bring attention to the hardships of their protagonists but also to include their presence through their own tone (Silverstone, 2007, p. 94). As mentioned before, Lika Antadze highlighted the fact that Chai Khana does not discourage the authors from using their own tone in the stories.

All three contributors commenting on their work approach provided different details on how they are building the stories.

To avoid any kind of stereotyping and manipulation, Tati Sattar reflects on her approach to storytelling, "... I generally want to show the current scene that exists here subjectively." This approach is depicted in her semiotically analysed photo as well. The photo shows a rural family's life in Azerbaijan: poverty and lower socioeconomic factors, such as old Soviet-looking plates and electricity cuts. Focusing on the protagonist while she is fixing a traditional treat in the darkness and including her husband in the background, holding a light for the woman reveals the fact that the household mainly depends on the woman; she is the one keeping the wheel going while the husband is providing the "light."

Tati Sattar explained that while understanding the women's difficulties, she did not want to exclude men's role, "But there is another side to this that falls on the man - financially. Then here we are automatically discriminating against men." Hence, the photo highlights the husband's contribution through his image of holding a light for his wife.

Salome Kinkladze's approach to the stories is avoiding victimisation in her stories as she sees women suffering injustice, also showcasing resilience. Hence, the visuals are central to the storytelling of Chai Khana, as they can be subjected to double interpretation influenced by several cultural and social factors (Berger, 2008). On the one hand, the audience can see challenges and hardships, like in the photos of a fish-selling Georgian woman by Salome Kinkladze. But on the other hand, this visual also exhibits resilience, and the mere smile on the woman's smile is proof of that.

In some cases, visuals provide more visible emancipation, as in the case of Sharaf Naghiyeva's protagonist Pari Banu. Further to the semiotic analysis, the photo gives two different meanings. First, Pari Banu is quite visible in a traditional setting such as the Tbilisi neighbourhood, which might indicate that in such a setting, she is high probably subjected to discrimination and oppression. Second, being easily detected in a traditional environment, one can easily detect the protagonist's courage. The experience of viewing these visuals is not neutral but deeply impacted by power relations and our experiences with the real world (Berger, 2008).

The struggle for democracy, freedom of speech, and inclusive society are the key topics in the region, and Chai Khana's example demonstrates why civil organisations such as this one are important for the South Caucasus. Through the practices of social imaginary and the encouragement of cultural citizenship, Chai Khana provides a platform - a public space to tell stories, including hardships and sufferings, to acknowledge injustices and discrimination ignored by mainstream media. Supporting those who are invisible or unheard and helping them to express themselves is essential for democratic public spaces (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 53), where the inclusion, acknowledgement of human rights, and equal opportunities are key.

Conclusion

The focus of this Master's thesis is the case study of Chai Khana, an independent media platform in the South Caucasus. The data for the research was collected through the triangulation approach, which entails interviews, textual and visual analysis, and provide a set of findings that have been instrumental to the outcome of the thesis.

The collected data provided a solid base for understanding how Chai Khana offers a voice to those who are oppressed, discriminated against, and ignored. The output of the study contributes to media and communication studies in terms of providing a comprehensive analysis of how storytelling and independent media practices can impact audiences and create an association with them. Additionally, the study contributes to communication and cultural studies by offering in-depth research on how communication can influence the construction of cultural identity.

The theoretical framework for the study was influenced mainly by two concepts studied during the Master's program in Media and Communication Studies. First, the social imaginary – concept Charles Taylor explains as invisible ties holding together a group or community of

people and constructing their relations based on shared values (Taylor, 1994, p. 227). Second, cultural citizenship – the concept that stands for developing cultural identity and a sense of belonging to a community (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 53).

Using the above-mentioned theoretical framework supports the study in understanding how Chai Khana provides an opportunity for the oppressed to connect through social imaginary and practice cultural citizenship along with the contributors of the media platform. To showcase the study's findings, this part of the thesis will focus on providing answers to the research questions.

How do Chai Khana and its contributors support gender diversity and inclusion and represent the voices of the oppressed?

To understand the capacity Chai Khana has been influential in supporting gender diversity and inclusion, data collected through the conducted interviews with the executive director of the platform and the contributors was specifically beneficial. As a result of the analysis of this data, along with the data collected from the textual analysis of the articles and visual analysis, it was possible to highlight three main points on how the media platform and the contributors support diversity in terms of gender and represent their voices.

Firstly, using character-driven storytelling brings the readers closer and offers a more intimate look at the lives of real people who are going through the same hardships as they do. This act facilitates social imaginary (Taylor, 2004, p. 160) and allows the readers to find their reflection and inclusion in the platform. Subsequently, the readers feel more connected to these characters and even widen their outlook, as the contributor of Chai Khana, Sharaf Naghiyeva, mentioned during the interview. The absence of stories as such from traditional media outlets impacts inclusivity negatively (Richardson, 2001, p. 157) and results in more alienation. Hence, bringing these stories forward and highlighting them provides more diverse practices in terms of gender.

Secondly, the contributors working on the stories provide their voices in these projects as they have gone through similar challenges or witnessed them closely. Thus, they know how to approach the subject and are aware of the multiple interpretations based on the power relations of the region (Berger, 2008). Chai Khana's role in such a practice is essential as the platform also allows the contributors to include their voices in the story (Silverstone, 2007, p. 94). The presence of the author's tone in the story is also an act of inclusiveness, as all voices need to

be highlighted. The contributors interviewed for this study shared their gratitude for their tone not to be excluded from the stories they make, which many platforms do not allow.

Lastly, by building its operations online, Chai Khana offers cross-border communication not only for the South Caucasus but also the for the world as well. Dahlgren points out that access to the resources provided on the internet allows the audience to participate in democratic processes (2013, p. 117) and people from various backgrounds to be involved in media practice (p. 109). Allowing the readers to connect to the stories published by Chai Khana through commenting or messaging the media platform directly is one more way to make the platform inclusive. Additionally, Chai Khana's strategy, oriented on beginning authors, offers more inclusive media making.

In terms of the contribution to media and communication studies, this highlights a clear message that inclusive media should not be limited to representing the voice of one party but rather adopt a holistic approach of inclusivity to provide diversity, starting with media making and ending with the two-side communication. As per this study, Chai Khana's strategy of not excluding the author's tone from the stories is another example of inclusivity and allowing the readers to reach out through social media.

What kind of gender injustice, oppression, and inequalities do the protagonists of the Chai Khana stories fight against? And how do they do it?

The data collected from interviews and complemented with the data from the textual and visual analysis provides a ground for assuming that injustices, oppression, and inequality of Chai Khana protagonists are the individuals who have been invisible in their own societies due to complying with expectations of the traditional gender roles and visible due to pushing the boundaries of the traditionally assigned roles. Nevertheless, Chai Khana challenges this by providing a more realistic account of the oppressed and the character-driven stories, which avoids the stereotyping which is the case for the mainstream media. The answer to this research question can be summarised in three points.

Firstly, there is a disparity between what is visible and what is invisible in the South Caucasus, which is encouraged by mainstream media practices. For example, a woman's character in traditional media is displayed either as an exemplary wife and mother or as a low-life person (Tuller, 2004). In contrast, queer people have been associated with law-enforcement-related issues. In that sense, mainstream media encourages stereotyping and taking women's

contribution to society and the economy for granted. This creates unequal treatment of women's labour and input. In contrast, queer people are put in more dangerous situations where they live under constant threats for their life.

Secondly, Chai Khana's approach to highlighting gender relations in South Caucasus through character-driven stories highlights gender roles that are closer to the ones in real life (Gauntlett, 2008, p.151), which challenges traditional and fixed roles and expectations, thus, creating a base for thinking beyond one's own context. This approach encourages the thinking that living out of the expectations of traditional gender is abnormal, profane, and problematic. Creating these stories is a collective attempt by Chai Khana, its contributors, and protagonists through the formation of social imaginary by shaping a narrative around their common experiences (Taylor, 1994, p. 159) and enabling cultural citizenship by contributing to the topic of gender inequality through creative media practices (Stevenson, 2001, p. 11).

Thirdly, understanding the historical context and its strong influence on the region, Chai Khana does not aim to bring change ahead of time, nor they aim at advocacy work. Gender roles are fixed in the South Caucasus and deeply embedded and institutionalised. Hence, the executive director and contributors interviewed for this story approach the situation by creating a basis for political change by addressing the hardships of the unheard.

To sum up, Chai Khana creates a basis for the change in the political and social agenda of the region by highlighting the difficulties of people who are otherwise unheard of or disparaged by the mainstream media. This supports Burr in the claim that creating a space to address the adversity of a particular group through collective attempts is crucial to encouraging social change (1995, p. 76). In the case of Chai Khana, women and queer communities in the South Caucasus are represented through their own stories, struggles, and fights. This allows the readers to see beyond the context that mainstream media provides and establish a foundation for a more inclusive society.

How does Chai Khana encourage cultural citizenship and social imaginary?

The motivation behind Chai Khana, its operations, strategy, and approach to collaborations are based on social imaginary and cultural citizenship concepts. Claiming male-dominated spaces to address the region's problems and discussing them through a female perspective is an act of cultural citizenship. Building narratives around mutual experiences and including the

protagonists, contributors, and readers in this narrative shaping is practising social imaginary. A more explanatory view of this is viewed in two points below.

First, throughout the thesis, it was detailly discussed how public knowledge is essential in forming modernity (Taylor, 2006). Nevertheless, the mainstream media of the region focuses on highlighting the traditional view of gender relations, ignoring the difficulties of those who are left out of the context. Hence, this approach creates a base for equal treatment of women's input to the society and economy, and stereotyping and threatening of the queer communities whose human rights are not acknowledged. By focusing on regional characters, Chai Khana finds the recognisable common challenges through which the contributors and protagonists connect. Later, this connection spreads to a larger audience of readers from the same context. Through sharing knowledge, experience, and suffering, people create a bond – a social imaginary (Hermes, 2006, p. 306-307) and find belonging.

Second, Chai Khana contributes to cultural inclusiveness by telling the stories of the unheard and oppressed and joining forces with the contributors and their protagonists. This approach is supported by the creative practices which are essential to exercise cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 2001, p. 11) and highlights how institutionalised discrimination is taking place (p. 45). The media platform encourages cultural citizenship by actively supporting the story-making about these protagonists through providing resources such as networks and creative and professional guidance. Additionally, Chai Khana's stories provide a ground for the readers to engage with these narratives to tell their stories and highlight their own adversities as well (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 199).

Further to the findings for the research question, Chai Khana is a clear case example of how independent media is essential for confronting issues outside of the political and social agenda. To approach the topics and stories not represented in the mainstream media is possible through the encouragement of social imaginary and cultural citizenship as the former supports in creating bonds between the protagonists and the audience, and the latter motivates toward the action, thus, voicing the audience's own challenges.

To summarise the conclusion of this study and its findings, Chai Khana is an example of how independent media is essential for encouraging a more diverse and inclusive society, which is achieved through three main points. Firstly, for the practice of inclusive media, it is important to adopt a holistic approach to media making. A holistic approach does not limit one party

while addressing the issues of the other. In the case of Chai Khana, it is achieved by including not only the voices of the protagonists but also the tone of contributors and input of the audiences. Secondly, addressing adversity in gender-related topics is possible through collective efforts and support to highlight injustice. As Chai Khana works on pointing out the struggles of women and marginalized communities in the South Caucasus, it is essential to unite the same-minded community of contributors who are not only willing to tell these stories but also understand their protagonists. By doing so, Chai Khana provides an alternative media to the mainstream one and contributes to building a more inclusive society where women's and queer community's adversity will be addressed. Thirdly, this case study is a prime example of how independent media is significant for a more democratic and inclusive society as organisations, as such, provide an opportunity to practice freedom of speech and address issues beyond the context of traditional media. To practise such a free expression, it is essential for a media organisation to activate social imaginary and cultural citizenship to cover the stories by building bonds between the protagonists and contributors, additionally involving the audiences in the process of finding their own story and voice.

References

- Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity. The changing nature of masculinities.* London: Routledge.
- Ang, I. and Hermes, J. (1991) 'Gender and/in Media Consumption' in Curran, James and Gurevitch, Michael. *Mass Media and Society*, 3d. Routledge, 307-328.
- Antidze, M. (2012). *Georgian National Ballet a family dance with history.* Reuters. [online] 9 Feb. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-dance-idUSTRE8181QT20120209> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2023].
- Bazeley, Patricia (2013). *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of seeing.* Penguin UK.
- Blau, E., Rupnik, I. and Baan, I (2017). *Baku: Oil and Urbanism.* Zurich: Park Books.
- Bloomfield, J. and Bianchini, F. (2001). *Cultural Citizenship and Urban Governance in Western Europe.* In: *Culture and Citizenship.* [online] SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/culture-and-citizenship>.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination.* Cambridge, Uk: Polity Press.
- Brisku, A. and Blauvelt, T.K. (2021). *The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic of 1918.* Routledge.
- Bruun, H. (2016). "The Qualitative Interview in Media Production Studies." In *Advancing Media Production Research: Shifting Sites, Methods, and Politics*, edited by Chris Paterson, David Lee, Anamik Saha, and Anna Zoellner, 131–46. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137541949_9.
- Burr, V. (1995). *An Introduction to Social Constructionism.* London and New York: Routledge.
- Byerly, C.M. (2011). *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media.* [online] Washington, D.C., U.S.A.: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MEDIA FOUNDATION. Available at: <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2023].
- Byerly, C. M. & Valentin, A. (2016), 'Legal dimensions of ownership and employment in the United States' in *Race and gender in electronic media: Content, context, culture*, RA Lind, (ed.) Routledge Taylor & Francis, New York.

- Campbell, D.T. and Fiske, D.W. (1959). Convergent and discriminant validation by the multitrait-multimethod matrix. *Psychological Bulletin*, 56(2), pp.81–105. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046016>.
- Caucasus Watch. (2020). South Caucasus countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2020. [online] Available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/south-caucasus-countries-in-the-world-press-freedom-index-2020.html> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2023].
- Naghiyeva, S. (2022). Alone, but liberated. Chai Khana. [online] 22 Aug. Available at: <https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/1365/alone-but-liberated> [Accessed 15 Feb. 2023].
- chaikhana. (n.d.). Chai Khana. [online] Available at: <https://chaikhana.media/en/about>.
- Sattar, T. (2023). Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations. Chai Khana. [online] 23 Mar. Available at: <https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/1443/hidden-hands-of-women-behind-novruz-celebrations> [Accessed 24 Mar. 2023].
- Kinkladze, S. (2022). Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry. Chai Khana. [online] 8 Oct. Available at: <https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/1362/invisible-labor-women-in-the-fishing-industry> [Accessed Feb. 18AD].
- Chikovani, N. (2005). A UNITED CAUCASUS: REALITY ROOTED IN THE PAST OR HIGH-FLOWN POLITICAL ILLUSIONS? *CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS*, 35(5), pp.45–54.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K., (2005). *Research Methods in Education*. Taylor & Francis.
- Coldwell, W. (2018). Art, beats and fashion: an inside view of Tbilisi’s creative boom. *The Guardian*. [online] 11 Apr. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2018/apr/11/art-beats-tbilisi-locals-view-of-creative-boom-georgia-fashion-nightlife> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2023].
- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Corner, J. (2011). *Theorising Media*. Manchester University Press.
- Couldry, N. (2010). *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*. Sage.
- D’Alleva, Anne (2005). *Methods and Theories of Art History*. Laurence King Publishing.
- Dahlgren, P. (2009) *Media and Political Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Dahlgren, P. (2013). *The political web: media, participation, and alternative democracy*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Demytrie, R. (2023). Georgia protests: Thousands on street for second day over ‘foreign agent’ bill. BBC. [online] 8 Mar. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64882475> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2023].
- Doona, J. (2016). *Political comedy engagement: Genre work, political identity and cultural citizenship* (1 ed.). [Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Media and Communication Studies]. Lund University.
- Duru, D.N. (2015) From Mosaic to Ebru: Conviviality in Multi-ethnic, Multi-faith Burgazadası, *Istanbul, South European Society and Politics*, 20:2, 243-263, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2015.1047080
- Edmondson, L. (1992). *Women and society in Russia and the Soviet Union*. Cambridge England; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent (2001). *Making social science matter: why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gallagher, M. (1985). ‘Women and NWICO’, in *Communication for All: New World Information and Communication Order* (ed.) Lee, Orbis Books, Maryknoll.
- Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, Gender and Identity*. Routledge.
- Gauntlett, D. (2007). *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Audiences and Identities*. Routledge, London.
- Kirby, P. (2023). Georgia drops ‘foreign agents’ law after protests. BBC. [online] 9 Mar. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64899041> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2023].
- Georgia: Tbilisi Pride cancelled amid violent protests. (2021). BBC. [online] 5 Jul. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57720366> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2023].
- Georgiou, M. (2013). *Media and the City*. John Wiley & Sons.
- gipa.ge. (n.d.). GIPA - Georgian Institute Of Public Affairs | GIPA. [online] Available at: <https://gipa.ge/eng/program> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2023].
- Goffman, E. (1985). *Gender advertisements*. New York. Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Grillo, R. (2007). An excess of alterity? Debating difference in a multicultural society. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30: 6, 979 — 998. DOI: 10.1080/01419870701599424

- Habibi, Z. (2016). *Surrounded by Images and Meanings: Essays on Media and Cultural Studies*. Yogyakarta: Penerbit Komunikasi UII.
- Habibi, Z. (2020). *Creative voices of the city: Articulating media, space and cultural identities by creative collectives in Southeast Asia*. Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Department of Communication and Media ed. Lund University.
- Hall, S. (2001). *The multicultural question*. Pavis Papers in Social and Cultural Research no. 4. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Hall, S. (2020). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. In: L. McDowell, ed., *Undoing Place?* [online] London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058885> [Accessed 4 May 2023].
- Hansen, A. and Machin, D. (2013). *Media and communication research methods: an introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harding, S. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Harding, S. (2008). *Sciences from Below Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities*. Duke University Press.
- Healey, D. and Stella, F. (2021). *Sexual and gender dissent in the USSR and post-Soviet space*. *Cahiers du monde russe*, 62(62/2-3), pp.225–250. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.12433>.
- Hermes, J. (1995). “Gender and/in Media Consumption”. In Ang, I. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for Postmodern World*. London and New York: Routledge, pp: 92-111.
- Hermes, J. (2005). *Re-Reading Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hermes, J. (2006). *Citizenship in the Age of the Internet*. *European Journal of Communication*, 21(3), pp.295–309. doi:10.1177/0267323106066634.
- Highmore, B. (2005). *Cityscapes : cultural readings in the material and symbolic city*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Howells, Richard and Negreiros, Joaquim (2003). *Visual culture*. Medford, Ma: Polity.
- Issoupova, O. (2012). *From duty to pleasure? Motherhood in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia*. In: *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. Routledge, pp.30–54.
- Jackson, J. (n.d.). *Georgia’s surprising LGBTQ+ scene*. [online] www.bbc.com. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230124-the-comedian-fighting-prejudice-with-laughter-in-georgia> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2023].

- Jensen, K.B. (2002). “The Qualitative Research Process”. In: Jensen, K.B., ed., *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and quantitative methodologies*. London: Routledge, pp.235-253.
- Kentish, P. (2021). *Fungus: the queer Georgian art collective destroying toxic social norms*. [online] Available at: <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/12502/fungus-tbilisi-georgia-queer-art-collective> [Accessed 8 May 2023].
- Kidd, Jenny (2014). *Museums in the New Mediascape: Transmedia, Participation, Ethics*. 1st edition. Farnham, Surrey, England: Routledge.
- Kilbourne, J. (2000). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kuckartz, Udo (2014). *Qualitative Text Analysis*. SAGE.
- Lacroix, C. (2021). *Alleged violations of the rights of LGBTI people in the Southern Caucasus*. [online] Parliamentary Assembly, pp.1–14. Available at: <https://assembly.coe.int/LifeRay/EGA/Pdf/TextesProvisoires/2021/20211202-CaucasusLGBTI-EN.pdf> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2023].
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Lockean, L. (2020). “Cultivating Cultural Citizenship” in *Excellent MSc Dissertations 2019*. Lund University, pp: 153-202.
- Longo, J. (2021). *Emotional Expectations of Educators: The social imaginary and emotional labor of teachers in American news media*, Lund University, Sweden.
- Matar, D. (2005). *News, Memory, Identity: The Palestinians in Britain and Social Uses of News*. PhD. University of London.
- Mehrabov, I. (2016). *Azerbaijani Women, Online Mediatized Activism and Offline Mass Mobilization*. *Social Sciences*, 5(4), p.60. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5040060>.
- Miles, M. and Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis an expanded sourcebook*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Mole, R.C.M. (2018). Introduction to ‘Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities’. *Slavic Review*, 77(1), pp.1–5. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2018.7>.
- Namazov, K. (2021). *Emerging Political Feminism in Azerbaijan: The Most Visible Other | Feminism and Gender Democracy*. [online] Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. Available

at: <https://feminism-boell.org/en/2021/10/25/emerging-political-feminism-azerbaijan-most-visible-other> [Accessed 3 May 2023].

- O'Donoghue, T. and Punch, K. (2003). *Qualitative Educational Research in Action*. Routledge.
- Richardson, D. (2001). Extending citizenship: Cultural citizenship and sexuality. In N. Stevenson, *Culture and Citizenship* (pp. 153-166). Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th ed. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Shahin Karimova, U. (n.d.). 'International space' on the ground. Chai Khana. [online] Available at: https://special-projects.chaikhana.media/Media.Code/international-space-on-the-ground_en.html [Accessed 2 Mar. 2023].
- Silverstone, R. (2007). *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Cambridge; Malden: Polity.
- Stafford, B.M. (1993). *Body criticism: imaging the unseen in Enlightenment art and medicine*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Stevenson, N. (2001). *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitan Questions*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern social imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Taylor, C. (2006). *Modern Social Imaginaries* by Charles Taylor. *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 60(1).
- Team GT (2022). *Tbilisi Pride Week 2022 Reviewed*. [online] 7 Jul. Available at: <https://georgiatoday.ge/tbilisi-pride-week-2022-reviewed/> [Accessed 28 Apr. 2023].
- Three upcoming sporting events promoting Azerbaijan on a global scale. (2014). *ITE Building Shows*. [online] 26 Nov. Available at: <https://buildingshows.com/market-insights/azerbaijan-global-developments/three-upcoming-sporting-events-promoting-azerbaijan-on-a-global-scale/801762564> [Accessed 27 Apr. 2023].
- Tiwari, S., Cancho, C., Meyer, M. and Fuchs, A. (2018). *South Caucasus in Motion*. openknowledge.worldbank.org. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-8329>.
- Tohidi, N. (1996). Soviet in public, Azeri in private. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19(1-2), pp.111–123. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(95\)00074-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(95)00074-7).

- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*, The Free Press, New York.
- Tuller, D. (2004). Media Diversity Institute. [online] Media Diversity Institute. London, UK: Media Diversity Institute. Available at: <https://www.media-diversity.org/> [Accessed 2 May 2023].
- Kuckartz, U. (2014). *Qualitative text analysis: a guide to methods, practice et using the software*. Los Angeles; London; New Delhi; Singapore; Washington Dc: Sage.
- UNESCO (2019). *Gender, media & ICTs*. UNESCO Publishing.
- United Nations (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. [online] United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>.
- Valiyev, A. (2016). First European Olympic Games in Baku: New Articulation of Azerbaijani Identity? *Mega Events in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, pp.131–149. doi:https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-49095-7_7.
- Van der Veur, D. (2007). *Forced Out: LGBT People in Azerbaijan Report on ILGA-Europe/COC fact-finding mission* Written by Dennis van der Veur. [online] ILGA-Europe, pp.1–72. Available at: <https://ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2022/05/Forced-Out-LGBT-People-Azerbaijan.pdf> [Accessed 1 May 2023].
- Van Zoonen, L. (1994). *Feminist Media Studies*, Sage Publications, London.
- Vertovec, S. (2018). Towards post-multiculturalism? Changing communities, conditions and contexts of diversity*. *International Social Science Journal*, 68 (227-228), pp.167–178. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12191>.
- worldpopulationreview.com. (n.d.). *Tbilisi Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)*. [online] Available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/tbilisi-population>.
- www.wilsoncenter.org. (n.d.). *Women, Democratization, and Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* | Wilson Center. [online] Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/women-democratization-and-islam-post-soviet-azerbaijan> [Accessed 1 May 2023].

Appendixes

1. Consent form

Consent form for Participation in Interview Research

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study led by Leyla Abdullayeva (researcher) from Lund University, Media and Communication Studies programme. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

1. I have been given information about the research project. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me.
2. My participation as an Interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion to participate.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by Leyla Abdullayeva (researcher), from Lund University. The interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview. I also allow the recording of the interview. It is clear to me that if I do not want the interview to be recorded, I am fully entitled to withdraw from participation at any point in time.
4. I have the right not to answer any questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point in time.
5. I have the right to withdraw my consent at any time.

Date

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

2. Interview guides

2.1. *Interview with the Executive Director of Chai Khana*

Introduction

- Could you please introduce yourself briefly and tell me about your role at Chai Khana?
- How did you get involved with Chai Khana?
- Is your current role in alignment with your professional and academic background?

Tbilisi

- Are you originally from Tbilisi? Do you reside there?
- How would you describe the role of Tbilisi in the formation of Chai Khana? What role does it play? How is Tbilisi important as a location for Chai Khana?

The motivation behind Chai Khana

- Tell me a bit about the story of Chai Khana. How was it initiated? Who was involved in it?
- How did you come up with the format? Mainly online and, in some cases, physical exhibitions?
- How is Chai Khana funded? How hard is it to get funding? Do you have problems with it?
- What is the role of photography/visual or text format?
- Do you think artistic touch is important to bring the audiences closer to the screen and have a look at the lives of those who usually do not make it into mainstream media? Why? What is special about Chai Khana? Why Chai Khana is important in fighting gender inequality or gender oppression?
- How does Chai Khana bring together the artists and the oppressed? How does it create bonding and solidarity in fighting injustice?

The stories

- Are there seasonal submissions or random submissions? How do you open a call for submissions?
- How do you select submissions? How do you select which stories are going to be published? Who has more of a chance to end up being published on the website?
- You probably get lots of feedback from the audience. Are they positive or negative? How do you associate or work with that?

The future

- What is the current situation with Chai Khana? Do you foresee any future challenges and hopes for Chai Khana?
- Would it be possible to get in touch with you if I have further questions?

2.2 Interview with Contributors of Chai Khana

Introduction

- Could you please introduce yourself briefly and tell me about your relation with Chai Khana?
- How did you hear about Chai Khana first? And how did you first contribute? What was your contribution?
- How is your personal, professional and academic background related to what you do?
- Where else do you exhibit your work?

Tbilisi

- Are you originally from Tbilisi? Do you reside there? (Why did you move to Tbilisi?)
- How would you describe the role of Tbilisi in the formation of Chai Khana? What role does it play?

The stories

- How do you find the stories to work on? How many stories did you make for Chai Khana? How often do you submit? Did all of your submissions pass through the editorial approval?
- Who is the protagonist of your stories? Why is it important to tell your stories? What is your aim for contributing to Chai Khana (fighting gender inequality, oppression – Let them answer first and take into account the words they use)? (Note to myself: which word the contributor uses to define the protagonist)
- What is more effective in telling their stories? Photography or text? Why?
- How can an artistic touch play a role in bringing the audiences closer to the screen and having a look at the lives of those who usually do not make it into mainstream media?
- What do you pay attention to when choosing the stories to tell? How do you create the story? What do you take into account when creating the visual or writing the text? Do you kill the darlings?
- You probably get lots of feedback from the audience. Are they positive or negative? If negative, then how do you deal with that?

The future

- Do you plan to continue working with Chai Khana? What is the motivation behind that plan?
- Would it be possible to get in touch with you if I have further questions?

3. Participants

1. Lika Antadze

Executive Director at Chai Khana

2. Sharaf Naghiyeva

Chai Khana Contributor

Author of “Alone, but liberated”

3. Salome Kinkladze

Chai Khana Contributor

Author of “Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry”

4. Tati Sattar

Chai Khana Contributor

Author of “Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations”

4. Interview transcript

4.1. Interview with the Executive Director of Chai Khana, Lika Antadze

*Questions in bold, answers in regular font.

Could you please introduce yourself briefly and tell me about your role at Chai Khana?

Yeah, so I'm Lika Antadze. Currently, I'm Executive Director at Chai Khana. I joined the team in 2017. Back then, I was... I joined as a Media Manager from Georgian side because Chai Khana is a cross-border platform. We have editors from all three countries, Armenian, Azerbaijan and Georgia. And I joined in 2017, I was curating Georgian side of Chai Khana. All formats of films, feature articles and also photo stories, and later on from 2019, I serve as an Executive Director of Chai Khana and my main responsibilities are fundraising, reporting, also everyday operations and I overlook editorial workflow as well. Although I'm not an Editor, I really try not to get involved in the editorial decisions. But obviously, I overlook over operations development, communication and all the aspects of all the projects that Chai Khana is conducting. So basically, I'm involved in pretty much everything since we are a small organization. It's kind of everyone does everything. Like, we are all involved we are small team of 10 people. So it's kind of we do diverse tasks each of the group members. I myself. I'm not a journalist. My profession is, I did... I'm a specialist in comparative literature and film studies. And I somehow ended up from 2017, I ended up in media, Chai Khana, then I got very much interested in the sphere, I described myself more as a media manager, as an editor because what I do is more media management than editorial or straightforward journalistic work.

So your current role is in... is not in alignment with your personal professional or academic background, right?

Let's say my academic background is more related to yes, Literary studies and film studies but somehow because we at Chai Khana work with text, I think it's still quite aligned. I think a lot of students from film and literature eventually end up in media as well. So I wouldn't say it's completely different. I wouldn't say so. I think I think academic background still helps me in this sphere. So...

Okay, but how did you get involved with Chai Khana? Because you said that you started as the... you know, a media representative from Georgia. And I mean, how did you first hear about Chai Khana?

Um... The way I first heard about Chai Khana was through my acquaintance who was working here and she was... She received an offer from to work from a different country, from Civil Society organization outside of Georgia. And she said that the position is opening for the media manager who has to coordinate journalist documentary filmmakers and photojournalists for Chai Khana and coordinates, the content from Georgia and back then I was working at the publishing houses as a litera... Literature student. I want to work with publishing houses. Also coordinating author and translators. For one of the main publishing houses in Tbilisi, and I decided to apply... I sent it to platform to this position in 2017, when it was open.

I see... Are you from... originally from Tbilisi or do you just reside there?

I'm originally from Tbilisi. Yes, I was born here. I was raised here. I did my BA outside of Georgia in the UK and then I came back. So mostly just my... Most of my life I'm based here in Tbilisi, Georgia.

So, how would you describe the role of Tbilisi overall? In Chai Khana? Like How does it, you know, what kind of role does it play? I mean, of course, you mentioned in the letter that you I mean in the document that you sent me there is a political reason but is there anything else about Tbilisi that is making Chai Khana be based there?

I think if it looks through the lens of Armenia and Azerbaijan, well if we conduct and joining the sessions because it's also important to understand, that Chai Khana is not like a classic online outlet with lots of training. And we teach our authors like we... Initially, Chai Khana was set up as a mentoring platform. So, we were looking for young students who were either studying journalists or were about to graduate from journalism school. It was kind of a platform outside of classical studies which would allow you to gain more skills. So it was more really oriented toward beginners. It is still oriented on beginners because we do not want to give up that.

That group and for example, we are running fellowships now. Once in every three months, for the beginner authors and it includes trainings and the sessions and guest speakers. So, it's a combination of both like, you know, work of a journalist but also teaching those authors. And because of this, this aspect of Chai Khana, we also conduct... In the past, we used to do it more often. Now, it's a little bit difficult because of the resources, plus the pandemic also. It has been really bad in the sense of meeting physically. And this ability was in a safe place where you could go all the journalists from the region except from the conflict. It's regions of ... Abkhazia... Obviously...

For obvious reasons. But somehow we still manage to have a local journalist and filmmakers and also bring them from Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is still is a hub for us where we could meet physically. For example, last year we still did the physical meeting and it was quite, let's say comfortable at the safe space for us more or less, but, you know, things are also changing with current developments in Georgia. So, It's not getting easy. It's getting harder. Yes...

Yes, I understand. But do you think Tbilisi plays another role in the formation of Chai Khana? like, besides the, you know, political and safety.

I think the I mean except to the safety issue and as a hub I think it all. So does offer a specifically again to go back to this idea of freedom of speech. It does offer spaces where we could be hosted. It does offer a kind of strong, more or less, strong civil society groups with whom we could partner and it makes our it's... it's really important. In this case, although I wouldn't say that situation is that different in Armenia, for example. Armenia also has a strong civil society, but it would be different with Azerbaijan. And also, like, bringing journalists from Azerbaijan to Armenia, would be a challenge. That's why it's again as, coming back to the safety issue and the help and opportunities, more or less, I would say like it's booming and as you know, currently it's hard to say with this law that current government was trying to implement to weaken the civil society. It's not like It's not guaranteed. Safe space, you know, you have to fight for this lately. This has been this become quite evident that you have to fight for this place but up until now still, you can like have more opportunities with civil society groups.

So it's like... I feel like Tbilisi is more like a down-to-earth creative city, with underground, you know, art, you know, capabilities and that's why I'd like exploring that side of Tbilisi as well.

Yeah, I think I'm more in a group of people could say Tbilisi like "Why?", but because I really, I'm annoyed with the current construction boom, that has been going for already many years, and it's really taking all the soul from the city. It's quite chaotic for me. I understand what you mean in relation to Baku. For example, I did sense this lavishness and like really posh side of development developing the city, but I think to some extent it's all it's might be true with Tbilisi. For example, Pari Banu whom you mentioned in the beginning, we had a meeting with her and she said that she feels more free in Tbilisi. She feels more safe in Tbilisi, which I understand, I see. But I also couldn't fully understand because we also have quite radical nationalist groups were homophobic, and who are quite dangerous. So but I guess she was comparing it with Baku and it's OK. If you feel more safe than Baku, maybe, yes it's more safe but I wouldn't say that it's that safe.

So you mentioned that a little bit like about the story of Chai Khana before you were able to join there. Like who did initiate it and how it was initiated and who was initially involved in it?

Yeah, Chai Khana was founded by, main founders are three people. One of them is she's from actually US, Hawaii, as strangely it might sound. So if Caroline Sutcliffe settled in the region, many years ago and she was initially, she was working in Azerbaijan. She was, she did her masters in UK and she was exploring this region. And when she came back to the region, she had this idea to set up the media organization where, which would unite all the countries of the South Caucasus including the conflicted regions. She started this work with Nvard Hovhannisyan and Lala Alieva. Nvard was from Armenia. Lala was from Azerbaijan. They were both studying at GIPA university, which is the university which is a university based in Tbilisi. And the university has a program in English for Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists. And also documentary filmmakers or photojournalists. Well, whichever path they chose afterwards. And both Lala and Nvard were students of GIPA. And the idea was again to create this platform for students and for currently graduated students of journalism and they started Chai Khana. It was initially, it was quite small. They started with trainings. Again, one of the lecturers of Chai Khana, Nino Orjonikidze who is still with us as a commissioning editor of film and video stories, joins them as a trainer. For several occasions. Then later on, she actually stayed for a long time and she's still with us. And as I said initially it started as a as a physical space where they would meet and train these young authors and later on in 2015,

February, the platform was launched where which was operating in five languages, local languages of the South Caucasus, English and Russian. And English became kind of the united language for this platform and then they started more actively publishing online and doing social media communications. And later on, the team expanded, and they added the communication manager. They added editors text editors and commissioning editors for film and video. And later on, we also added the photo editor to our team. And this kind of initially how it was formulated as a cross-border platform publishing in several languages with cross-border focus. It's still up until now. It still remains like that. So, that part of Chai Khana hasn't changed much initially. There were a lot of physical meetings, as I mentioned teaching sessions training sessions, where journals would come and they would sit together. Wait to know later on with pandemic, it became more difficult. And now for example, our fellowship is fully online and we also try to maybe do meetings three times per year, physical meetings, I mean, but it's not always works out with the resources. So if we don't have resources, we trying to stay online but mainly the operations and especially after the pandemic but also before the pandemic operations of Chai Khana and are also... It's online. Like, for example, we used to have a photo editor outside of the region. Our Media <anager from Azerbaijan, Durna Safarova works outside of the region, so it's quite diverse, I think. The main team who is based in Tbilisi now, it's five of us and the rest five are out of the region. Not based in Tbilisi, I'm sorry... The Armenian the media is from Armenia, based in Armenia. And the rest of us, is in Tbilisi and our photo editor is based outside of the region.

So would you say this format like that? Mainly online? And in some cases, physical was somehow motivated, not motivated, but pushed by the pandemic, right?

Not necessarily, even before pandemic, we were all already online. For example, with the Media Managers from Armenia, obviously we wanted to have and also as Azerbaijan we wanted to have them based locally. For example, initially, when I joined Chai Khana, everyone was based in Tbilisi. And then the difficulty was that the team from Armenia, team from Azerbaijan left Tbilisi and then we tried to recruit new people. Somehow it turned out that not everyone, we wanted to recruit was based in Tbilisi and we said that actually, it might be fine because we actually need people based locally more than people based Tbilisi because we're covering mostly stories from Armenia and other Azerbaijan. So it's important to be... This was

an important aspect to be connected to the region and then we said, actually this could work if we try to do it online and then when we started doing it, pandemic hit and it was anyway online. So it worked in a way kind of... It was a positive coincidence because we didn't have any choice anyway. And after pandemic, obviously, it didn't become a priority to be physically together. Well, but sometimes obviously, it helps, for example, if Commissioning Manager, it's really better to have them physically based in Tbilisi. Because I work with her closely and it's nice to have them because it's always a kind of communication strategy might change quickly, and I just want them to be, It's easier, obviously, but not the top priority, I would say.

Okay, you said you are working with fundraising as well. So, you mentioned it, briefly in your document that you send me before. Could you like elaborate a little bit more about how it is founded? Is it hard to get funding with this current economic situation? And you know priorities have changed, for many organizations? I mean, do you... How do you get funding? And is it difficult now? What kind of problems are you facing? Like now... Or before?

Yeah. So I would maybe start from the very beginning when Chai Khana was launched. It was obviously launched with several small funds. It was the IWPR, War & Peace Institute. You might have heard about them. This was a very initially very first grant that Chai Khana. I think it was given for developing a short documentary, initially. And then, later on, some other institutions joined. One of the, kind of significant support that Chai Khana received in order to launch the platform was from the British Embassy program which was the Conflict Security and Stability Fund and it was given to Chai Khana from 2015 until 2019. It was a significant support for us because it helped Chai Khana to develop and to expand and really establish itself as a alternative media platform. And basically starting from 2015 up until now, obviously, 95%, maybe of Chai Khana's funds are coming from donor organizations. These are international organizations such as the UN, or British Embassies or foundations such as, for example, Fritt Ord Foundation from Norway, Norwegian Helsinki Committee also supported us in the two years ago. And Open Society Foundation. So these are like 95% I would say. But obviously, we are trying to, to diversify and we try to also maybe generate some reader support and that's why we launched the donation, in 2022, we launched a donation for Chai Khana, which generates a very small amount. But, however, we see that there are some readers who are willing to donate on a monthly basis, which is a big encouragement for us and it's really

nice to see that the reader or audience is trying to support you. And we also try to diversify we, for example published a book two years ago, and we were trying to sell this book and it was also kind of alternative revenue for us. To generate some income. We tried also to explain experiment with Google ads, which also generates very small amounts, like, very insignificant, but at least we're trying not to be like, fully hundred percent dependent on donors. As for fundraising with donors and international foundations and institutions, yes, it became difficult, obviously, one of the reasons is that after worrying, Ukraine obviously priorities have changed and the region is not that priority as it was before the war. And obviously, Ukraine also needs bigger support, now, as it's in the war, and this also affected, definitely affected, the fundraising possibilities in the region. It's difficult. So obviously right, now, we are experiencing some problems. We for example, we don't have, for example, a core support until the end of the year and we are constantly fundraising. So this is like a non-stop process and it's difficult because when you are in the process of fundraising you cannot plan for the long term, you cannot plan a long term strategy. Which is not great because, because you're always in the survival mode and when you are in the survival mode, there, it's hard to expand your audience. It's hard plan things in advance, because you are in a survival mode, you do not know what's gonna be in a two months time. What's gonna be six months time? And obviously it's very hard for the organization to deliver quality content, to extend audience, to try to develop the skills of new authors but also try to survive. It's like it's, you know, competitive.

I actually understand you but a little bit about the content of Chai Khana. Like there's photography, in the stories, there's text. And you mentioned about the texts, I think there was a moment when you mentioned that text is important. And how would you say that, you know... Could you elaborate a little bit more about the role of photography and visual, or like there because some videos and the text format? Like how do they affect the story? Like, which one would you prefer? Or like, you know? Which one is playing more role, would you say?

Um... I think the format itself at Chai Khana, I think what was key from the beginning and what still remains the key is the character-driven stories. So what we were trying to do well and what we are still trying to do is to have character-driven stories and they show the big issues through individual characters who are not like this... Who are not in a spotlight in mainstream media. So we rarely cover like famous people or influencers on celebrities or political figures. We cover people who are really behind the scenes like people who are not in

the spotlight of media and about whom people don't hear anything. And these are people but these are also people who are affected by social economic and political development in the region. So, key was that we bring these people to the spotlight and we tell their stories because these are the real of how people like how these changes and social issues in the region, affects like people who are in the whole living, the rural areas who do not have a platform for their voice to be heard. So I think that was the key and the visual side of Chai Khana, or is I guess the secondary level. Well, I guess not that secondary because it's also really much kind of determines the storytelling as well and the content of the story. But so idea was that we do not just produce texts, but because we are online, and we want to also somehow develop this visual side of online media. And that's why we started working on photo stories. And each feature story have the visual aspect is not the photo, maybe in illustration and I think documentary film was also... Documentary film is key in this case because in terms of formats, China Khana allowed authors to experiment from the very beginning. So, allowed authors to really bring new formats and really not to have this straightforward narratives and linear narratives, but to really experiment and convey the message and story in a way that authors felt like, and that was quite new, I guess because there were not many platforms that would allow authors to do that. I don't I think up until now they're not many platforms that allow authors to do that and that was also in attractive in a way because it was kind of pushing the boundaries of storytelling classical storytelling and allowing them to really do some new things that otherwise they would not able to do. I mean, filmmakers, in this case, and authors.

But do you think artistic touch, because you said that there's certain pushing the limits regarding, you know regarding the storytelling. Do you think the artistic touch is important, you know, in bringing the audiences together and see those stories.

I think, yes, hundred percent.

Why?

New formats allow you to explore new perspectives and these new perspectives, I think, are quite attractive for audiences. So, it's something that it's something new. And it's also, when we talk about character-driven stories, it's also relatable for people, right? It's not like... These stories would not distance the audience but vice versa. Like the attempt is that, the initial idea, is that every other reader and every other audience sees themselves in these stories and kind of expense their perspective beyond their context. I think one aspect of this cross-border aspect

of uniting audiences from three different contexts is important because... Like this idea of seeing yourself and your position beyond your context, really helps you to identify where you stand. So, for example, the Georgian audience seeing themselves, beyond Georgian context and seeing the context from neighboring countries, really helps you to understand who you really are. Because if you only, kind of, concentrate on your own circle and don't look beyond then, it's hard to identify in a way who you really are, and how you look at things, right? So that's like pushing the context is really important. And I think one of the key aspects, the expected important, really key element of Chai Khana is really pushing, not only the format but also pushing the context. So, I see the also from Armenia. I see these stories from Armenia and I can reflect reflect on my own position later on. How I see things from my own perspective through seeing through a different context, which, you know, is not that different because we know that in this region we experience very similar challenges. So In a way it's it's pushing the boundaries but also understanding... Understanding the historical context where we all come from. And that's what I really, I think it's really attractive in Chai Khana. That's the perspective that really structs me. This pushing the context also. That's why it's interesting. Also being part of this team.

Okay, that you would describe as being so... Because my next question was going to be, why Chai Khana is special. And I think that you responded to it perfectly. Correct me if I'm wrong. So, basically, there are so many stories in Chai Khana, in various you know aspects, like in various areas like there's this war-related theme, there's gender-related theme, there's LGBTQI+ -related theme. I decided to go with the gender. And I want to ask you, why Chai Khana, do you think is important in fighting the gender inequality and gender oppression?

Initially. Well, let's start from the name itself, "Why Chai Khana?" Which was... Which is I think... Now, I think it's different but initially, obviously, it was confusing for the media platform to be called Chai Khana. And the name Chai Khana has a quite symbolic meaning. Places, you might know well, that it's a tea house, where men would gather usually, and they would like, talk about certain issues discuss the important thing though maybe less important things. But basically a space for men, where women are not welcome. And the idea was to take away this space from men and let it be a women's space where actually we are discussing things and we are kind of shaping this face. And to transform it as an online space as well online and

offline space. That's why kind of getting this space from men. Its becoming dominated with women was... Was intentional. Let's say it's an intentional decision to call it Chai Khana.

At Chai Khana. We are we're women. The team is hundred percent women and the majority of our authors are also women, which means that these female perspective and stories told by women are of our key. And this also intentional to bring these women's voices on the surface in. And obviously, the reason is that's the region is... All the narratives in the region are male-dominated, right? The men-shaped politics men-shaped, I don't know, culture men-shaped education, men-shaped, all the levels of social life in the region and that's why it was important to bring this aspect really in the front line. And the stories that you would see a Chai kKhana descendency. Let's say, 95 of them are told by women and are women-related stories. And these are stories also quite hard stories, about domestic violence, about child abuse, about like these different issues that the currently, region experiences. But also, these are the stories of women's resilience, right? The stories show how women try to overcome the challenges and what are issues that women face. I think that aspect is also quite well articulated when we asked our authors, female authors, "Why this platform is important for us?" "What opportunities it gives to you?" And many of them identified "This telling the story of one woman or telling the story of myself is important." And I think, yeah, that's, that's intentional and that's I think this much needed. A much-needed activity to somehow help women to who tell their stories and... Also help other women to feel empathy. Yeah, this is as much as the media can do. We do not like do advocacy work obviously, like we do not really push for the policy changes, but we create the basis for it, so, like others could do the political changes and others could reflect later, on in political life.

A little bit about the submissions. So you have submissions like once in a while I just want to understand what those submissions are based on. Are they seasonal or just random? Or how do you open a call for submissions?

Yeah, sure. So I will tell you how it is for the last two years, because before that it was a bit different. Before that, we had editions that were running once every three months. These editions, we identified the key topics. For example, it was a gender, it was conflict-affected communities. It could have been basically environment or any other big umbrella topic and we would then start submissions for this editions. But later on, we a little bit changed our focus and the right now we have two main open slots. One of them is a fellowship which I already

mentioned that runs once in every three months and it is targeted for young authors. Those are mainly journalists, documentary filmmakers and photographers/ photo journalists. And fellowship, also targets Armenia, Georgia and conflict-affected regions. We choose. So we have this, we have quotas so to have equal number of fellows from each country and to have them equally representing it in all street formats. Selection is a little bit difficult because you have to consider that they are representative from all three countries and they are representing all three formats. So meaning, that we have, for example, two documentary filmmakers, we have two photojournalists and we have two, also, who is the article writer. These fellowships again have a specific schedule work plan where they and it's quite intense, actually. It's like they have weekly meetings actually, several times per week. They have to attend guest speakers. They have to submit assignments, as it has specific advanced and eventually they are working on the X number of stories, which is in the end of the fellowship, we publish them and we create communication strategy together. That is one slot, another slot that is directed more from more, for the like mid-career authors, but also, beginners could also apply if they have a good story idea. We call this slot "behind the scenes of current affairs." And this idea came from the fact that, with pandemic and then later on, 2020 conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and with the changing situation, dramatically changing, quick changing situation in the region. It was difficult to really stay relevant and also take adequate during times of crisis. Because for example, there was pandemic and we wanted to cover completely different topics, and it was really difficult and we had to put our topics on hold. Because it would... We wouldn't seem quite adequate during the times of crisis. And then, we came up with this idea that... Why don't we create this slots that would allow authors to explore topics that are that are relevant during the time? But also maybe topics that are not very, very much overlooked by the mainstream media. And we created this thought behind the scenes of current affairs and this slot was intended for the stories that might or might not end up in news cycles, but stories that are explored more from, from a different character-driven perspective. And these stories could be starting from environments to domestic violence to children's rights to health care.

It can cover pretty much anything as long as it is. It's as long as it addresses issue that is relevant in the region. And this allowed us to be flexible, but also, to create these two really retain this niche of where exploring stories, not news, but exploring the stories that are relevant and might not end up in the news. Also, the fact is that they might end up in the news. It's just a different perspective, we're looking for. These slots we published once every two months, but actually,

it really depends for example now... Because we're looking for resources and we're fundraising we're not sure whether we're gonna announce the next slot but hopefully,

It's actually we have to announce it now, in March because initially, we announced it in January and March would be the next cohort where would announce it. Hopefully, we could do it. We're just waiting for the answers from our funders and supporters if they would provide financial support to us. So we can keep announcing this call. Sorry to maybe I'm talking a lot... but also happened if we happen because we also have certain small or funds project-based funds. And if we have a chance to additionally announce the call, and I think that there are more open calls. For example, in January, we had an opportunity to publish a call specifically for stories, focusing on LGBTQI+ topic. In this case, then we would announce a separate call, which would be specifically for the pitches on LGBTQI+ stories.

Lika Antadze: Last year, for example, we had a call for short documentary slots that was not under our fellowship or under the behind-the-scenes, but it was a separate slot... because we got this project-based support to produce short documentary films. And that was about changing landscapes for example, changing landscapes is an umbrella topic. But it obviously, it was about maybe environmental changes or like decisions, made by governments that affect like a rural areas, for example, or people who are not in power, to make decisions for themselves. These types of calls are also open, we don't know exactly. When are we gonna announce them? But if we get the chance, it can pop up randomly. Like not really planned, but it might pop up during the year.

I see. So, just to brief this who is going to be selected? Like, I mean who is being selected for the stories? Who has more of a chance to end up Being published on the website, you would say?

Who submits a good picture? So we have yes, the good pitch is the key. A person who's have been a good pitch is obviously more... is obviously will end up for publish on the platform will end up developing the story. We have these forms for each call, the teaching forms, which is different for me for each format. So, for photographers, they submit different pitch and the documentary filmmakers will be submitting a different pitch. For fellowship though, for fellowship, the process is a little bit different because they do not only submit the pitch but they also submit recommendations, cover letter why they want to be fellows, and... What else? I think... Yeah, like short CVs. So ,for fellowship because it's more of a training that mentorship

program, they submit more documents but for the behind the slots, what they submit is like well-researched speech and another hint maybe also would be that we're looking for stories that are not that well covered in mainstream media. So, if a person brings the stories that is already well-covered. If they bring the character that is already in a spotlight, they either have to offer a different perspective or they just have to drop the story and focus on someone that is not well covered. So, we really try not to duplicate the stories that are already out there. So that's why we expect answers to research. If the character is well-covered if the stories are already well-covered. And there is nothing new to it to the story. So, it's better to pitch story that is not like already in a spotlight than there's nothing more to say about story, there's no way to tell the story differently.

I see. So, is this the way I understand? So people are pitching you and if you choose the topic then they are, developing you, they are not coming to you with ready material.

Oh, that's a good question, by the way, this year, we really wanted to make the slot for the ready-made, ready-made, stories... Eventually, it really depends on our resources, but the option is also If the story is, for example, in the middle of development, or sometimes they have a story which is ready made, but it hasn't been published for us. It's important than the story, is not published and we publish it first. There is also sometimes an option where we permission this type of stories, we obviously, maybe pay a little bit less than compared to the stories that we developed together with the authors but there's there is an option of publishing the stories that are ready-made or half, for example, in the production process and we then come in and maybe tell them, "Okay, like you can develop maybe a shorter version in terms of film, for example. They pitch films that are maybe part of the larger projects and we offer them, "Maybe you can develop a pilot or a smaller version of for Chai Khana."

For photostories, the photostories that are not published elsewhere. We also sometimes offer them, "Okay, this is a good story and maybe you can publish it first at Chai Khana. And there is a certain licensing fee that we pay for those stores. So yes that is also an option.

So, you probably get feedback from the audience. Are they positive? How do you associate if it's negative.

It really depends. You know, usually, the topics related to LGBTQI+, usually, there are negative comments and I think it's somehow... It's not just on choice, but any other media platform as well. It's the comments that I understand, in English and Georgian, and for the Armenia and Azerbaijan, we are supposed to check with our team from Armenia and Azerbaijan. So we go 24/7, we monitor the comments and if there is a... Sometimes also, if there's a threat, we obviously would remove the comments. If the person is threatening the author or the protagonist.

But you know, it really depends. It really depends on the story. It really depends... Sometimes there are very constructive and good discussions on social media. But I've heard the cases were, for example, author was threatened or I don't know... The protagonist was threatened. Also, we like, for example, if it's really dangerous, we try to to publish certain stories anonymously, or we try to cover the face of the protagonist. It really don't show them and not to also show their show, their names and surnames. This is also quite usual. We are quite often do that... but again, it's really depends. I would say it's both combination of negative comments and sometimes very constructive discussions. In private messages, we very often receive positive comments that they found out about the platform and that it's very encouraging, especially from our authors that it was important for them to cover this specific story. Because, I don't know if it's like, they're all personal story on, or It's been a long time since they wanted to cover this story. And it's really great they got this platform. We, obviously it's very encouraging to receive this positive feedback as well.

Yeah, I get it. Totally get it. So, what is the current situation? What are your future hopes and challenges for Chai Khana?

Currently, we actually ended up in a very challenging situation because 10 days ago, the government in Georgia was going to adopt the foreign agent law that is quite similar to one operating in Russia, which would eventually label all civil society and independent online media as agents of the international interest. Let's say so people who really do not act in the interests of their country but who acting interest of outside forces. This also, it's outside forces, obviously, meaning the Western forces. Western forces because majority of the support is coming from the West, obviously. Right? For independent online media and for civil society. This was dangerous because in that case would need to, we would have to register in this list of foreign spies, let's say, and obviously, it would tarnish our reputation as an independent

output because for media being under influence of anyone, it's already a big problem. It doesn't matter whether it's a Western force or it's like Russian force. We position ourselves and our core value Independent. That's why like labeling ourselves as agents was, like, really something that we didn't want to do. That's first thing. And obviously, eventually, it would have liked to disappearance of civil society, independent media, because we all know how this law played out in Russia. And there was a massive protests in front of the Parliament of Georgia Parliament, parliamentary building in Tbilisi and eventually they ended up abolishing not passing the law because there were clashes and for example, last week we were all present. The whole team was based in the Tbilisi was present there and it was super hard because we had to work as well. But we also had to attend the attend the protest for this law not to be passed. This was in a way I think. For now it's a win for us because we don't have to register and we don't have to go through this bureaucracy and we don't have to label ourselves and there is no danger for now. But we don't know how it's going to turn around, right? Like they might... This law might come back because the current government is doing everything to really affect the reputation and weaken civil society and independent media. So that's why I would say currently we are in a difficult situation because A- the fundraising is becoming quite hard and the key resources, we don't know whether we, we are able to continue until the end of the year to continue our key activities. That's a one challenge. The second challenge is that now the government is doing a crash down on independent media. So that's the second challenge. So even if you survive, then you kind of have the second level of difficulty when government comes after you because you tend to tend to criticize the overall situation in the region. So it's, let's say it's not the best situation. It's again, survival mode, plus surviving under this... Um... Very unbalanced situation, right? Also, again, situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan also quite unstable after 2020 right? It hasn't never been stable in the region. No control of Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia still quite unbalanced, especially after the war in Ukraine. And we also don't have to underestimate how war in Ukraine affected the region, right? We're directly tied, the region is directly tied to the current development in Ukraine as well. So It's very chaotic right now. And yeah, I don't know, it's not the best situation.

4.2. Interview with the Contributor of Chai Khana, Sharaf Naghiyeva

*Questions in bold, answers in regular font.

Could you please introduce yourself briefly and tell me about your relation with Chai Khana?

Well... Um... I am originally from Azerbaijan and I started to photograph since 2012. I started with film and then I, it is almost 4 years, started to shoot on the digital. And when I started to... It was 2020 when I made my first assignment for Chai Khana. It was the period of the pandemic. I usually do portraits and that's why I need to go out and communicate this with people. So, it is about the interaction. And because I was stuck at home, I had no idea what to do. I was kind of depressed. And then I came across this open call from Chai Khana and they were talking about the people who are stuck at home. And I thought that it is a thing that is related to me at that moment. And I decided to do something with it. It was very basic project. I just made captions from web camera. But it was interesting. Then, after we continued to work and I think they helped me a lot to try to tell the documentary stories. Because before I was not focused on the documentary stuff but I was telling the stories. They helped me to realize that documentary is not boring at all. It can be something which is really interesting. And you can speak about that. But from the point of view of the documentary.

Okay, the first time you started collaborating with Chai Khana during the pandemic But...how did you first hear about it?

Yes, I heard it from my ex-boyfriend. He was working for them. He was... still is a photographer. I heard about them and I... followed them and started to see the projects they are making and I was really interested in what they are doing. Because they are the only platform which is telling stories from the South Caucasus. And making it interesting with artistic approach but still as documentary.

Could you please introduce yourself briefly and tell me about your relation with Chai Khana?

Well... Um... I am originally from Azerbaijan and I started to photograph since 2012. I started with film and then I, it is almost 4 years, started to shoot on the digital. And when I started to... It was 2020 when I made my first assignment for Chai Khana. It was the period of the pandemic. I usually do portraits and that's why I need to go out and communicate this with people. So, it is about the interaction. And because I was stuck at home, I had no idea what to do. I was kind of depressed. And then I came across this open call from Chai Khana and they were talking about the people who are stuck at home. And I thought that it is a thing that is related to me at that moment. And I decided to do something with it. It was very basic project. I just made captions from web camera. But it was interesting. Then, after we

continued to work and I think they helped me a lot to try to tell the documentary stories. Because before I was not focused on the documentary stuff but I was telling the stories. They helped me to realize that documentary is not boring at all. It can be something which is really interesting. And you can speak about that. But from the point of view of the documentary.

Okay, the first time you started collaborating with Chai Khana during the pandemic But...how did you first hear about it?

Yes, I heard it from my ex-boyfriend. He was working for them. He was... still is a photographer. I heard about them and I... followed them and started to see the projects they are making and I was really interested in what they are doing. Because they are the only platform which is telling stories from the South Caucasus. And making it interesting with artistic approach but still as documentary.

How what you do for Chai Khana is relevant to your academic, professional and personal background?

I have don't have any education in photography. I am just a self-taught one. I started to photograph because I was enjoying the process. And I worked, worked, worked. And I didn't stop. I don't think that is somehow related to my professional background or something. But... I really appreciate they started to help me to explain myself. When I usually take a topic to photograph, I am just following the flow. And I am just making the photographs and then I try to figure out what it tells. Making it somehow, verbally, readable. And when I started to do it with Chai Khana, Molly, their editor... She helped me so much. She has the ability to transform the bad written text by me to the same text but really... within the professional frame. And... Besides that I also enjoy working with you know, Anna who showed how the photographs should be edited, sequenced, and taken out or put. What makes the story really readable? If you just take one picture or add another picture?

Besides Chai Khana, where do you exhibit your work?

I exhibited it in Baku. We have the photography union - F37, which we are taking further, we are doing stuff together. We made exhibitions in Baku. It was five exhibitions. It was in Baku, a photography house and then we came here, Tbilisi with an exhibition. And we also exhibited on Kolga - photographic festival. And also we had the couple of exhibition with F37 here.

You are not originally not from Tbilisi but do you live in Tbilisi or visit Tbilisi? What is the situation? And why you are often there?

I moved here since June. When I came here in April because of Chai Khana's the same project that you were talking about, "Alone but liberated." And it was a workshop: How to work with LGBTQI+ community? So, I came here in April. We had this Kolga exhibition. So, I stayed here for a month. And I really feel different here. Like completely here. I feel more free. I feel more power. I feel more at home, I would say. And then, after, I went back to Baku for a month. I wasn't really happy there. Then, I came back (to Tbilisi) because of the residency. It was the residency in Poti. And some of our guys from F37 were participating (in the residency). And when I came back here, I realized that what is the reason to go back to Baku if I feel happy here. If I feel more productive here. Why go back? Since June, it is almost 8 months.

How would you describe the role of Tbilisi in the formation of Chai Khana?

I think Chai Khana being based in Tbilisi makes it more free, makes it more independent. Of course, the political reasons as well but also "svoboda slova" ("free speech" in Russian). I think this is the main reason. If it would be in Azerbaijan, it wouldn't be like this at all.

How do you find the stories to work for Chai Khana?

Well, usually they have a topic that I can... Well, "kotorie mne otklikayutsya" ("which get my attention" in Russian). Even... Usually, it was an idea in my head which I did not know how to use and how to make it real. And then, I came across this open call and then I saw that it matches. And I started to explore it. Generally, it was like that.

How many stories so far did you make for Chai Khana?

I think about five or six. I am not so sure but 5-6.

Did all your submissions pass through submission?

Yes.

From what I have seen in the website, you are mostly working on gender-related submissions. Any reasons for that? Or is it just the stories that fine to you?

This is the topic, at the moment, most interesting for me. That's why I am working in documentary. If you are not interested in the topic, you cannot do anything with it. So, at the moment, I am more into this and into the LGBTQI+ community. And I want actually to continue this topic with Banu. These are just a few of my interests at the moment.

But you are storytelling about Banu. You said that you want to continue with that. Is there any specific reason for that?

No, I am talking generally about the community.

Who are usually the protagonists of your stories?

I think they are free people who are trying to... Some of them are trying to be free in Azerbaijan. Some of them cannot find a place and some of them cannot fit in the borders of Azerbaijan. That's why they are moving out. But I think they are liberated people who are trying to somehow live with the society which does not really accept this liberation of this people and this borderlessness.

Why it is important to tell their story? Is there any aim for you?

I think when this kind of stories are told, other people who are afraid to be themselves and afraid to go beyond the borders that were put to them by the society, can become more brave. I think that this is the, the main reason to make people to, you know to go beyond. And it's also some somehow reflects my own story. Here, I feel myself more myself because I can be whatever I want to be. And there I have to fit to some, you know, borders.

But I saw there are not only photography, but written text. Are you the one writing the text?

There was a part of diary of Banu. And the rest of the text is mine. Of course, with correction of Molly because without that it would not be so good.

But what would you say is more effective in telling a story? Is it a photography part or the text part?

I would say that it's photography part definitely...

Why?

I think it's somehow connected to the social media stuff, which is now, like people consume the information from the photographs generally. They are just scrolling. They need a really bit information. They are not read a lot. And if the photograph is quite appealing to drag their attention to read, they will go to the website and read. If it's not, no. I think maybe it's kind of egoistic but...

Do you think artistic touch is important to tell these stories?

Definetely, it is.

Why? How it is important?

This is important for me as for the person who is doing it. Because when I am doing something which is kind of "zakaz" ("order" in Russian), then it becomes not mine and I can not put the things or my points of view or my way of seeing the topic. When I'm doing it the way I am doing it - with my artistic approach with my point of view etc, it is the discovery that I told. And it makes it like, whoever makes it if it is somehow with the artistic touch. It makes it unique, it makes it less documentary. This is my personal "not liking" the documentary stuff because they are kind of similar to each other. And when there is an artistic touch, it makes it unique. And when it makes it unique, people consume the media another way. It is more, I would say, art than documentary story.

So, you do not think of documentary as an art.

Did I say that (laughs)? I don't like them. Like, no, it depends on the documentary, of course, it depends on the documentary. For example, there is a ... who is just amazing photographer and she, if I'm not mistaken, it was 2017 when she went to Afghanistan and she was just staying at people's places. She was living with them, and this story is completely documentary, but this is so touchy emphasis, so beautiful, and if you watch the photographs they have... So, so deep, like you are watching this, it was paper, but it goes so deep. And you can read so many, so many layers there. So, I think that it depends on the documentary.

So about when you are choosing a story. So you said that, usually it's coming as an order or request. For you to tell a certain story. Is it request? Oh. Like we have to make it this area in this topic and you choose the story to tell.

Yes.

Okay, how do you choose that specific story? Is there any?

Oh, this is so long story. I came across the Instagram. I came across the account of Natig Asghar. Which is originally Banu. And I just liked the appearance. It was really interesting face, and I wanted to make this portrait of him. And we made this session. It was, it was really enjoyable. It was in the beginning of 21st (2021), I think. No, no, it was 22nd, it was twenty twenty second. Then it was January or so, and I made the first session with him. Then sometime past and you know, we made another shooting but it wasn't shooting-shooting. The painter from Azerbaijan asked me to find someone for body art and I found him and we went there and they worked and blah blah. So this way we kind of became friends with Banu and he was sharing a lot about his life about how the situation in the family, how he was living in Razino (district in Baku). Which means that it's really, really, yes, it's really really hard part. I didn't know what I'm doing. I can say for sure that I never knew what I'm doing. I am just following some gut feeling and I'm just shooting when I feel that it should be shot. So I was shooting, shooting, shooting and then I came to the point when I didn't know what to do with the project and then I was accepted to this workshop and I came to Tbilisi in April. At that moment, I still didn't know what is going to be with which shape it's gonna have. So, after this workshop, when I went back, it was the strange situation when Banu told me that he's going to leave Baku because he cannot leave this way. And I asked him just to write down kind of diary and that's it. So he started to record his thoughts and then I know, then he moved here. Like, it was three or four days before me here, and then I'm here. And then we continue to shoot here and then we started to have the performances here and I was going to her performances and I was shooting it and I was asking some questions and blah blah blah. So it became to what it became. And I really wasn't sure that I finished. Because, I think that there is so many things to tell because when I was asking, he told me, he told me that She had the problem with she was living in Guramishvili which is really far from the center and Georgia is also not so, not so tolerance to queer people and she had the accident. Two guys who were like terrorizing her and even beating. So then she moved from there to the center. Now, it's okay. Now she doesn't have any kind of problem at the moment because she's living in the center, but it's just because she's living in the center.

But that's about Banu. What about the other stories? How do you find them? How did you find?

I generally, I generally have the idea, travel has the topic, I have the idea, and then I post on Instagram that I need this, this please advise me if there is someone who can who is interested or something. And then, one story. It was so interesting. One story I made just by following the the advices of the protagonist. So I posted on Instagram and I got first protagonist. I went and shot her. Then she told me about another one and I went to her and I shot for and it was like eight people and I was following this pattern it was really interesting way of doing it.

Like what what are you taking into consideration when creating the visual or text? Is it the same kind of a method or like you know, technique that you are using to tell the story? Or?

I, I just tried to be sincere. I just tried not to lead anywhere because I think that in, I think in any story, it's important but in documentary story it's even more important. Not to drive anywhere, not to lead and let it see the way it goes. Because the only way that it can be like truthful and sincere, it is the way how it goes itself in without my directions to any... Any side, because it will add my.. My wish to finish it this way, or that way. Am I clear?

You create probably lots of materials... But do you kill the darlings are there?

Of... of course. Of course.

Is it like just a small killing or...

No, no, no. I do and sometimes it likes makes me freaked out because this is like my favorite photograph. And this is, this is oh, how can I do it? And then I realize that, yes, it's better without it is too much. Or this is like, this is the repetition. It is just my favorite photograph. See and yes I do. I hate this part. I hate this part.

But is it you killing or someone else like pushing you towards the killing?

First, I kill. Then it's Chai Khana killing. Yeah, generally this way. I try to not to leave anything for others to kill because it's like, feels easier to kill yourself than anyone else. So yeah. but, It helps a... It really helps a lot. This killing part is really really something that helps you to be shorter and clearer in what you are telling. Because as a photographer I want to show. And this and this and this is also going

to view on. This is also like nice view to this and this is the repetition so that's why this "otsekayet vse nenuzhnoe" ("gets rid of useless" in Russian).

Right. Okay. Good to know. So you are in social media and you share stuff that is published in Chai Khana, right? Chai Khana receives certain feedback or you might receive certain feedback about what you do. Especially, since, you know, topics related to LGBTQI+ is something that is probably getting a lot of feedback and are they positive? Are they negative? And if negative, how do you deal with that?

Both, of course, and I came across lots of like not pleasant comments on the topic about Banu. And I think I started to react... Not react at all because like, people are different. Someone is accepting something. Someone is not. And like these projects are made to trigger this people and to try to explain something to them, to make their view a little bit wider. So, if it happens, it means that this projects are getting to the aim and irritating people. If they are irritating people, it means that it is kind of working. And it's a way how it all starts. Like first, you're getting irritated with something, then you are starting to think about it, then maybe you are accepting something in it. So, I think that they're (Chai Khana) doing great job by doing it and by having the not super wide but story from like different different people. And the bad comments are also really good things to see it means that they read it and it's important that they read it, they see it.

So are you still planning to work with China and...?

As I missed the open call because I was thinking so much so long about what to do, what to do? And I hadn't really idea. I really just wanted to work with them again, so I missed the open call and now I'm waiting for the next one. And I don't want to repeat myself with the topics. But as I told you, I am now into this queer community and I want to make something about it again. So, so I'm waiting for the open home.

Okay, so you get certain requests from Chai Khana but at the same time, you're applying for the open calls, right?

Yes, yes. Generally, when I am getting requests, it's something about three countries like the project which are done the same topic but in three countries, but what I'm doing by myself like when I'm applying, it's the from Azerbaijanian side... There is also the issue that I didn't figure out. Since I moved here, It is kind of difficult to tell the stories from Azerbaijan. And so now I am still trying to figure out how to do how to deal with it, because I can talk about people who are living here, Azerbaijani people

who are living here, as in case with Banu/ But it's not completely that what I wanted to do, so it's a bit tricky right now.

Okay, good to know. Now, what is the motivation behind you still being interested in working with Chai Khana?

As I told it's the way of growing. Because they helped me a lot. In telling the stories both verbally and visually. I think that they are kind of taking me out from my comfort zone. And when I'm telling this stories, I don't think that I would start doing docomentaries without them without their you know, push. And also this topic, for example, I wouldn't start this topic but I started it. I think they just push me out from my comfort zone. and I am the person who kind of needs some deadlines to finish something because... So, they're helping in it as well. And the main part is editing.

5. Samples from interviews

5.1. Codebook for interviews

Stories and characters – How contributors find their topics and protagonists, then build a story on them.

Submission and selection – The experience with the submission and selection, overview of the process.

Community – The story of Chai Khana. How did the contributors find out about it? How did they start collaborating?

Developing the story – Approach to the story and methods of working with the protagonists.

Support of creative development – Support contributors receive while collaborating with Chai Khana.

Voice of South Caucasus – Cross-border practices of Chai Khana and how interviewees relate to the region.

Gender – Gender-related hardships and personal experiences.

Impact – Expected effect on the society, the motivation behind working with Chai Khana.

Future Prospects – The future for the region, Chai Khana, and contributors.

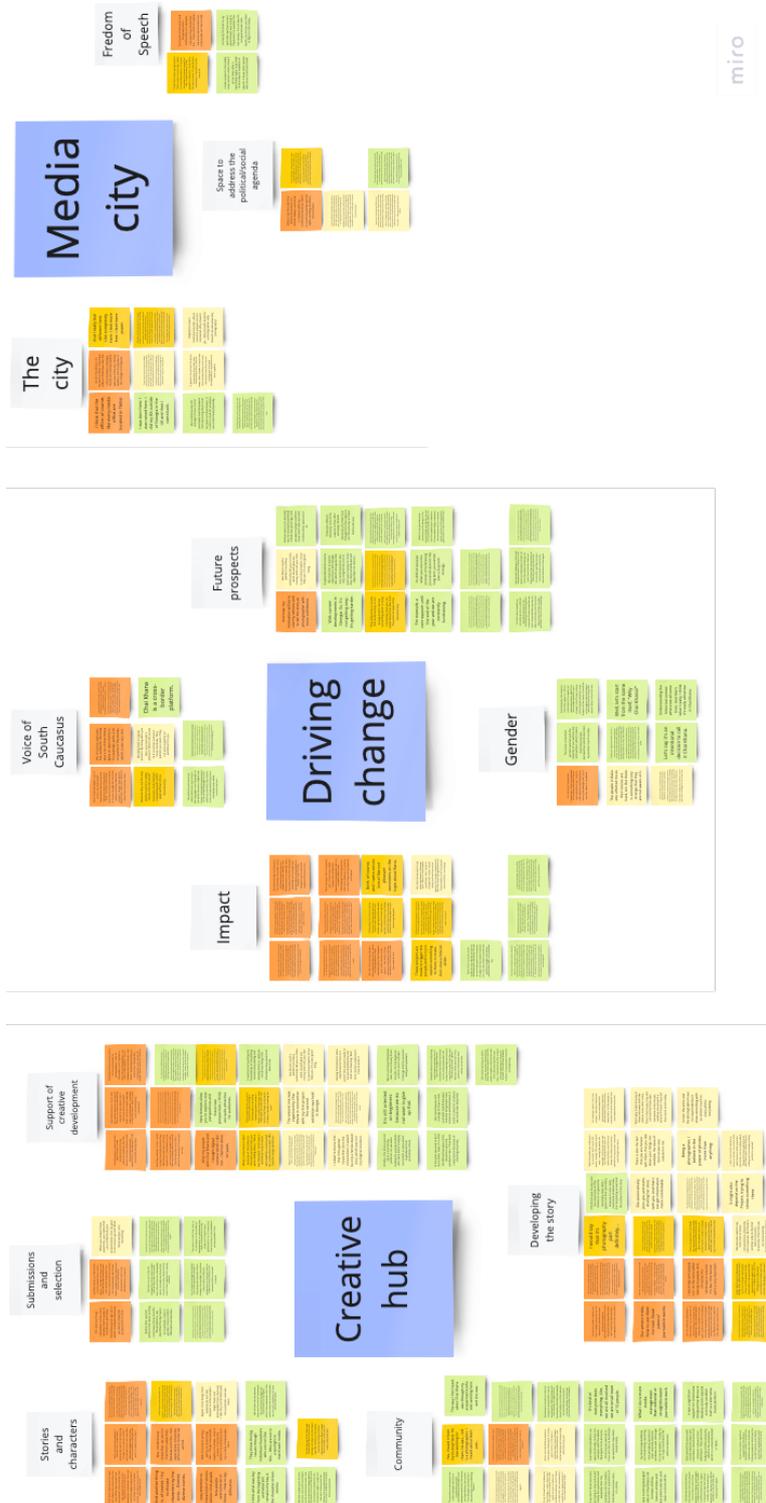
Freedom of speech – Practicing freedom of speech in the South Caucasus.

Space to address the political/social agenda – Turning to Chai Khana when there is a need to tell a story.

The city – Importance of Tbilisi to Chai Khana, creative community and media.

5.2. Analytical coding

This page overviews thematic, analytical and descriptive codes. The following pages present a zoomed-in version of each theme and an overview of the codes used during the analysis.



Stories and characters

One thing I think about when I get asked to write about the stories of people who are not like me is how to make sure I'm not just writing about them from a distance. I want to get into their heads and see the world through their eyes. It's not always easy, but it's worth the effort.

And another thing is, of course, try to choose characters by the story. Diverse, diverse stories.

I pay attention to these kind of stories where I find people who overcome all of these... How to say, difficulties.

I think what was key from the beginning and what still remains the key is the character-driven stories.

That also happens to be one of the things that we've been talking about a lot. It's not just about the characters, but about the stories they're telling. And that's what makes them so powerful.

And another thing is, of course, try to choose characters by the story. Diverse, diverse stories.

I pay attention to these kind of stories where I find people who overcome all of these... How to say, difficulties.

I think what was key from the beginning and what still remains the key is the character-driven stories.

That also happens to be one of the things that we've been talking about a lot. It's not just about the characters, but about the stories they're telling. And that's what makes them so powerful.

Submissions and selection

Oh, and one thing I think about is that since I'm always looking for ways to get more diverse voices, I want to make sure I'm not just looking for the same old stories. I want to find new voices, new perspectives.

And another thing is, of course, try to choose characters by the story. Diverse, diverse stories.

I pay attention to these kind of stories where I find people who overcome all of these... How to say, difficulties.

I think what was key from the beginning and what still remains the key is the character-driven stories.

That also happens to be one of the things that we've been talking about a lot. It's not just about the characters, but about the stories they're telling. And that's what makes them so powerful.

Support of creative development

One thing I think about when I get asked to write about the stories of people who are not like me is how to make sure I'm not just writing about them from a distance. I want to get into their heads and see the world through their eyes. It's not always easy, but it's worth the effort.

And another thing is, of course, try to choose characters by the story. Diverse, diverse stories.

I pay attention to these kind of stories where I find people who overcome all of these... How to say, difficulties.

I think what was key from the beginning and what still remains the key is the character-driven stories.

That also happens to be one of the things that we've been talking about a lot. It's not just about the characters, but about the stories they're telling. And that's what makes them so powerful.

Creative hub

Community

The position opening for the editor-in-chief was a big deal for me. It was a chance to lead a team of talented people and to make a real impact on the industry. I was excited to take on the challenge.

Yes, I heard it from my ex-boyfriend. He was, still is a photographer. I heard about them and...

The way I first heard about Chat Khana was through my acquaintance who was working here and she was...

It's a place where you can find everything you need to get started. From the basics to the advanced, it's all here. And the best part is, it's all free.

It's a place where you can find everything you need to get started. From the basics to the advanced, it's all here. And the best part is, it's all free.

Developing the story

Our artistic tricks, how to use good pieces of journalistic works.

I would say that it's photography part definitely...

She automatically joins you and starts sharing her story with you. And then it can get information more comfortable.

Being a photographer, I believe in the power of photos more than anything.

It might also depend on the Project, trying to stress something there.

Like things with people in it. It's the items which bring people out of their shells. It's like, this human spirit is very important.

Because we want to tell that kind of story that's not just about the facts, but about the people. It's about the human experience.

When I came here in April because of Chat Khana's launch project that you were talking about. I was looking for a way to connect with people who were not like me. I found it here.

The second one was organized by Chat Khana in connection with my first project. The second exhibition was held in Georgia.

I talked to Daria first that if the gender researcher joins the conversation, it would be only a female-based story, which was not my original intention.

It's still oriented on beginners because we do not want to give up that.

We are raising eyebrows in Georgia. It's a bit of a challenge, but it's also a chance to make a real impact.

I was curating Georgian side of Chat Khana. All formats of films, feature articles and also photo stories, and later on 2019.

It's a place where you can find everything you need to get started. From the basics to the advanced, it's all here. And the best part is, it's all free.

It's a place where you can find everything you need to get started. From the basics to the advanced, it's all here. And the best part is, it's all free.

It's a place where you can find everything you need to get started. From the basics to the advanced, it's all here. And the best part is, it's all free.

It's a place where you can find everything you need to get started. From the basics to the advanced, it's all here. And the best part is, it's all free.

It's a place where you can find everything you need to get started. From the basics to the advanced, it's all here. And the best part is, it's all free.

Overview of the coding.

T=Themes, AC=Analytical codes

T	AC	Descriptive codes		
	Stories and characters	<p>But I try not to victimize the characters. It's one of my criteria when I'm choosing the character and when I am choosing the story, now it's one of the criterias. Because the victimization is something which don't give us the objective picture. People, of course, suffer, people struggle, but they also have their means of survival, their approaches. They are brave. They are always finding... Yeah, they are resilient and that's how I try to see things. That's how I try to make people see other people. and not like they are... [Salome Kinkladze]</p>	<p>Myself. If the things that I experience and feel happen to other people, I target them and photograph them, because I feel very comfortable with the questions I will ask them. [Tati Sattar]</p>	<p>But also maybe topics that are not very, very much overlooked by the mainstream media. And we created this thought behind the scenes of current affairs and this slot was intended for the stories that might or might not end up in news cycles, but stories that are explored more from, from a different character-driven perspective. [Lika Antadze]</p>
		<p>So this way we kind of became friends with Banu and he was sharing a lot about his life about how the situation in the family, how he was living in Razino (district in Baku). Which means that it's really, really, yes, it's really really hard part.</p>		

	Submission and selection	<p>But later on, we a little bit changed our focus and the right now we have two main open slots. One of them is a fellowship which I already mentioned that runs once in every three months and it is the targeted for a young authors. [Lika Antadze]</p>		
		<p>The position is opening for the media manager who has to coordinate journalist documentary filmmakers and photojournalists for Chai Khana and coordinates, the content from Georgia and back then I was working at the publishing houses. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>if we don't have resources, we trying to stay online but mainly the operations and especially after the pandemic but also before the pandemic operations of Chai Khana and are also... It's online. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>Yes, I heard it from my ex-boyfriend. He was working for them. He was... still is a photographer. I heard about them and... [Sharaf Naghiyeva]</p>
		<p>She started this work with Nvard Hovhannisyan and Lala Alieva. Nvard was from Armenia. Lala was from Azerbaijan. They were both studying at GIPA university, which is the university which is a university based in Tbilisi. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>I'll say we have the same bubble, I don't know how to say it to understand, like for example, some when you are connected with the media other media, you know, for example, if you know Chai Khana is not so popular, you would still know about them from your friends. Because your friend is the friend of, for example, Chai Khana Editor or so on. You understand? Because it's very common in Georgia. We have the same networks and it also influences our work. And our decisions. [Salome Kinkladze]</p>	<p>Chai Khana was founded by, main founders are three people. One of them is she's from actually US, Hawaii, as strangely it might sound. So if Caroline Sutcliffe settled in the region, many years ago and she was initially, she was working in Azerbaijan. She was, she did her masters in UK and she was exploring this region. [Lika Antadze]</p>
		<p>In 2018, they announced that you should send us the talented</p>	<p>It's as if since then I've been on their things... radar. After</p>	

		<p>photographers in your country that we do not know, who are engaged in art, so that we can meet them. Someone sent my name there. I still don't know who sent it. But thanks a lot. Chai Khana went to my profile sent by the same person and got acquainted with my work. Then they tagged me on their profile, took some of my work and tagged it. [Tati Sattar]</p>	<p>that, I set a goal for myself that I will apply as soon as there are suitable conditions. And if there is a topic that I am interested in, I would like to apply and see if I can cooperate with them.[Tati Sattar]</p>	
	Developing the plot/story	<p>Because we used to say that most of these conversations, physically, fall on women. But there is another side to this that falls on the man - financially. Then here we are automatically discriminating against men. [Tati Sattar]</p>	<p>For example, when I shot this project, I already understood from the interview that I generally want to show the current scene that exists here subjectively. Let the people to comment on what they will feel and understand from this. [Tati Sattar]</p>	
	Support of Creative/professional development	<p>Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to study professionally this very important medium. But Chai Khana and other platforms and other projects gave me opportunity to photograph to tell stories with photography. [Salome Kinkladze]</p>	<p>I got honorarium or. So it's like I got some honorium and then of course, so it was not something enough to buy camera, but it was some kind of symbolic. Yeah, that's this camera belongs from my latest work... Is related to my latest work... which I, yeah, it was something very memorable. [Salome Kinkladze]</p>	<p>So, that part of Chai Khana hasn't changed much initially. There were a lot of physical meetings, as I mentioned teaching sessions training sessions, where journals would come and they would sit together. Wait to know later on with pandemic, it became more difficult. And now for example, our fellowship is fully online and we also try to maybe do meetings three times per year, physical meetings, I mean, but it's not always works out with the resources. [Lika Antadze]</p>

		Initially, Chai Khana was set up as a mentoring platform. So, we were looking for young students who were either studying journalists or were about to graduate from journalism school. [Lika Antadze]	It is still oriented on beginners because we do not want to give up that. [Lika Antadze]	We are running fellowships now. Once in every three months, for the beginner authors and it includes trainings and the sessions and guest speakers. [Lika Antadze]
		Allowed authors to really bring new formats and really not to have this straightforward narratives and linear narratives, but to really experiment and convey the message and story in a way that authors felt like, and that was quite new, I guess because they were not many platforms that would allow authors to do that. [Lika Antadze]	When I came here in April because of Chai Khana's the same project that you were talking about, "Alone but liberated." And it was a workshop: How to work with LGBTQI+ community? So, I came here in April. We had this Kolga exhibition. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	They have their own working principle, their own special things. Of course, as a person cooperating with them, I treated this with respect and said, OK, if you want, if you know a gender researcher, give me their contacts, and I will contact them. Durna sent me the contacts of 3-4 people. And there was Mrs. Sevinj. I don't remember her last name and she commented. They added it to the same article. [Tati Sattar]
		But there is such a platform and they voluntarily tell you to come, work, we will give you money and train you, that is, you have projects, let us help you. It's a very good thing. [Tati Sattar]	I talked to Durna first that if the gender researcher joins the conversation, it would be only a female-based story, which was not my original intention. [Tati Sattar]	The second (exhibition) one was organized by Chai Khana in connection with my first project. The second exhibition was held in Georgia. [Tati Sattar]
Driving change	Voice of South Caucasus	Because they are the only platform which is telling stories from the South Caucasus. And making it interesting with artistic approach but still as documentary. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	Oh, it's more authentic. Yes, authentic. We have also a lot of Chai Khana gives an opportunity to, for example, write a lot of quotes in the stories, which is also very nice. [Salome Kinkladze]	I think one aspect of this cross-border aspect of uniting audiences from three different contexts is important because... Like this idea of seeing yourself and your position beyond your context, really helps you to identify where you

				stand. So, for example, the Georgian audience seeing themselves, beyond Georgian context and seeing the context from neighboring countries, really helps you to understand who you really are. Because if you only, kind of, concentrate on your own circle and don't look beyond then, it's hard to identify in a way who you really are, and how you look at things, right? [Lika Antadze]
		Chai Khana is a cross-border platform. [Lika Antadze]		
Gender	As a feminist and gender researcher, I have my approach of choosing characters like or topics based on my... And it's often based on my experience and my knowledge and I try to mention about it, somehow. [Salome Kinkladze]	The people in Baku also affected me as their stories are hard, etc. But there is something very strange that they are not aware of it. [Tati Sattar]	And obviously, the reason is that's the region is... All the narratives in the region are male-dominated, right? The men-shaped politics, men-shaped, I don't know, culture, men-shaped education, men-shaped, all the levels of social life in the region and that's why it was important to bring this aspect really in the front line. [Lika Antadze]	
	Let's say it's an intentional decision to call it Chai Khana. [Lika Antadze]	Places, you might know well, that it's a tea house, where men would gather usually, and they would like, talk about certain issues discuss the important thing though maybe less important things. But basically a space for men, where women are not welcome. And the idea was to take away this space from	And of course it is necessary to get permission, because when I went to Masalli for the first time, I had that problem, because the women did not want to show their faces. Their husbands were standing next to them and looking at the pictures to see if their faces are in the photo, if yes, then how it looks, etc.	

		men and let it be a women's space where actually we are discussing things and we are kind of shaping this face. And to transform it as an online space as well online and offline space. [Lika Antadze]	They were making me to delete it. It was like such a challenge for me at that time. [Tati Sattar]
	Well, let's start from the name itself, "Why Chai Khana?" [Lika Antadze]	Understanding the historical context where we all come from. And that's what I really, I think it's really attractive in Chai Khana. [Lika Antadze]	
Impact	And yeah, it can I think it has much more influence. Because the reader is, reader, as a common word, general word, is in fact very diverse and it can change the attitude. When they dial this kind of mirroring they are make the mirroring when they're reading stories. And yeah, it can lead to change, of course, it can lead to people to have more hope, it can lead them to change their behavior. [Salome Kinkladze]	These, yeah, these stories, these kind of stories change the human lives on individual level but also on institutional level, of course. I don't know if policymakers and politicians read Chai Khana or other social medias, but I believe that the... They know, they know that people will not stop talking and they, these kind of medias will help people to protect themselves to... To ask, what is their right? And to ask for more to ask for basic... Basic services and basic needs. [Salome Kinkladze]	These changes. But in long term, yeah. In short term, these changes are related with liberation of people who talk. For example, when I was interviewing the fishing women who are in fisheries, I'm sure no one asked them during these 20 or 30 years. [Salome Kinkladze]
	In private messages, we very often receive positive comments that they found out about the platform and that it's very encouraging, especially from our authors that it was important for them to cover this specific story. Because, I don't know if it's like, they're	Sometimes there are very constructive and good discussions on social media. But I've heard the cases were, for example, author was threatened or I don't know... The protagonist was threatened. Also, we like, for example, if it's really	But also from society, women were commenting on the, about the fishing women, were commenting on the Facebook post, other women in the regions. I saw some of them comment comments and they say where is this place or how

	<p>all personal story on, or It's been a long time since they wanted to cover this story. And it's really great they got this platform. [Lika Antadze]</p> <p>Yeah, this is as much as the media can do. We do not like do advocacy work obviously, like we do not really push for the policy changes, but we create the basis for it, so, like others could do the political changes and others could reflect later, on in political life. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>dangerous, we try to to publish certain stories anonymously, or we try to cover the face of the protagonist. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>she could do that. [Salome Kinkladze]</p>
Future prospects	<p>For example, a core support until the end of the year and we are constantly fundraising. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>But there is such a platform and they voluntarily tell you to come, work, we will give you money and train you, that is, you have projects, let us help you. It's a very good thing. [Tati Sattar]</p>	<p>It's difficult because when you are in the process of fundraising you cannot plan for the long term, you cannot plan a long term strategy. [Lika Antadze]</p>
	<p>So that's why I would say currently we are in a difficult situation because A- the fundraising is becoming quite hard and the key resources, we don't know whether we, we are able to continue until the end of the year to continue our key activities. That's a one challenge. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>We actually ended up in a very challenging situation because 10 days ago, the government in Georgia was going to adopt the foreign agent law that is quite similar to one operating in Russia, which would eventually label all civil society and independent online media as agents of the international interest. Let's say so people who really do not act in the interests of their country but who acting interest of outside forces. This also, it's outside forces, obviously, meaning the Western forces. Western</p>	<p>We position ourselves and our core value Independent. That's why like labeling ourselves as agents was, like, really something that we didn't want to do. That's first thing. And obviously, eventually, it would have liked to disappearance of civil society, independent media, because we all know how this law played out in Russia. And there was a massive protests in front of the Parliament of Georgia Parliament, parliamentary building in Tbilisi and eventually they ended up</p>

			<p>forces because majority of the support is coming from the West, obviously. Right? [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>abolishing not passing the law because there were clashes and for example, last week we were all present. [Lika Antadze]</p>
		<p>It's again, survival mode, plus surviving under this... Um... Very unbalanced situation, right? Also, again, situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan also quite unstable after 2020 right? It hasn't never been stable in the region. No control of Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia still quite unbalanced, especially after the war in Ukraine. And we also don't have to underestimate how war in Ukraine affected the region, right? We're directly tied, the region is directly tied to the current development in Ukraine as well. So It's very chaotic right now. And yeah, I don't know, it's not the best situation. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>Because they helped me a lot. In telling the stories both verbally and visually. I think that they are kind of taking me out from my comfort zone. And when I'm telling this stories, I don't think that I would start doing docomentaries without them without their you know, push. And also this topic, for example, I wouldn't start this topic but I started it. I think they just push me out from my comfort zone. and I am the person who kind of needs some deadlines to finish something because... So, they're helping in it as well. And the main part is Editing. Editing was visuals part and portable for it because verbal part is my weakness part. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]</p>	
<p>Media city</p>	<p>Freedom of speech</p>	<p>I think Chai Khana being based in Tbilisi makes it more free, makes it more independent. Of course, the political reasons as well but also "svoboda slova" ("free speech" in Russian). I think this is the main reason. If it would be in Azerbaijan, it wouldn't be like this at all. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]</p>	<p>Currently it's hard to say with this law that current government was trying to implement to weaken the civil society. It's not like It's not guaranteed. Safe space, you know, you have to fight for this lately. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>I mean except to the safety issue and as a hub I think it all. So does offer a specifically again to go back to this idea of freedom of speech. It does offer spaces where we could be hosted. [Lika Antadze]</p>

	Space to address political/social agenda	<p>The stories that you would see a Chai Khana descendency. Let's say, 95 of them are told by women and are women-related stories. And these are stories also quite hard stories, about domestic violence, about child abuse, about like these different issues that the currently, region experiences. But also, these are the stories of women's resilience, right? The stories show how women try to overcome the challenges and what are issues that women face. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>This is the topic, at the moment, most interesting for me. That's why I am working in documentary. If you are not interested in the topic, you cannot do anything with it. So, at the moment, I am more into this and into the LGBTQI+ community. And I want actually to continue this topic with Banu. These are just a few of my interests at the moment. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]</p>	
	The city	<p>Pari Banu whom you mentioned in the beginning, we had a meeting with her and she said that she feels more free in Tbilisi. She feels more safe in Tbilisi, which I understand, I see. But I also couldn't fully understand because we also have quite radical nationalist groups were homophobic, and who are quite dangerous. So but I guess she was comparing it with Baku and it's OK. If you feel more safe than Baku, maybe, yes it's more safe but I wouldn't say that it's that safe. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>But somehow we still manage to have a local journalist and filmmakers and also bring them from Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is still is a hub for us where we could meet physically. [Lika Antadze]</p>	<p>In general, those from the photo community have their own communities there. Several times, other friends of mine have also travelled there, and I have witnessed from their stories (Instagram) that such photographers can gather and work together. [Tati Sattar]</p>
		<p>And I really feel different here. Like completely here. I feel more free. I feel more power. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]</p>		

6. Sample from articles

6.1. Codebook for articles

Assigned roles – The review of gender roles, norms and values in the South Caucasus.

Invisible people – Indifference to the hardships of people.

Escape – Finding a way out and the consequences.

The future – Reality and hopes for the future.

6.2. Analysed articles

Alone, but liberated

Author: Sharaf Naghiyeva

Link: <https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/1365/alone-but-liberated>

Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry

Author: Salome Kinkladze

Link: <https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/1362/invisible-labor-women-in-the-fishing-industry>

Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations

Author: Tati Sattar

Link: <https://chaikhana.media/en/stories/1443/hidden-hands-of-women-behind-novruz-celebrations>

People

Assigned roles

Refusing to fall into accepted male or female roles makes you an outcast. She said that it was really a struggle to live in a society where even the color of your trousers, or wearing earrings can be a trigger for others.

Even a floral tote-bag was enough to start a debate and become an issue.

My alcoholic father wanted to hit me after seeing my new green shopping bag with the pronouns she/they. He was holding a knife.

She said that I need treatment for my strange behavior.

During the celebration of the holiday, household labor falls heavily on women.

She spends hours in the kitchen and local market after she gets off work to ensure the family is ready. This is in addition to her normal cleaning and cooking, and the entire process has always struck me as unfair: why should the burden of these holiday feasts fall on her?

Families preserve the region's traditions, including special customs and sweets made just for Novruz. Far Zulfiyya Aliyeva, 49, that means hours of work in addition to her job as an English teacher at the local high school and the family farm and small bed and breakfast.

Raziya notes that life has been like this "since we first opened our eyes."

When men catch fish, they probably get paid a lot more, and they catch a lot of fish. However, they work in groups and have to share their income. And their wage is what? They have so many expenses!

Nona stands by a covered shed on the highway in all seasons and sells fish with about 12 other women.

The income is paltry here. It takes a lot of hard work to earn 10 GEL per day.

Once, people came from Tbilisi, chose seven boys and one girl from Poti, and took us to Tbilisi. But my mom took me back to Poti because I was a girl, and she was afraid that being alone would be dangerous for me.

Every other family here makes a living with fish.

At age 10, Lali's ties to the sea began when her father taught her to weave fishing nets. Growing up in a family of fishermen, she says net-weaving was a family tradition:

I was born and grew up in the city of Poti. I was a gymnast, and I loved this sport very much.

"And what do the women get from selling the fish? 50 tetri per kilogram? Or one lari, maybe. I, especially, don't have any money left as I have to pay rent for this building.

She says that it's an exhausting job. Some women have been selling fish at the market every day for 20-25 years.

It's very exhausting. I have to get up at 7 in the morning. I don't have the strength anymore.

Invisible people

It's really difficult to be kind of "be outside the box" in a conservative society like Azerbaijan, especially in the context of gender.

There are no official statistics on LGBTIQ+ people leaving Azerbaijan, however anecdotal evidence indicates they seek safety in countries near and far.

For me, it is her labor—not the parties and celebrations—that define Novruz.

I decided to speak to the women who make our families' Novruz celebrations possible, to see how the force behind the holiday, feasts and traditions feel about the burden that has been forced upon them.

Women employed in the fishing industry in Georgia are usually informal workers, so there is scarce data on their incomes and contributions to the sector.

She is an economist by profession, and she worked for the private and public sectors for years before she lost her job.

It takes women about three years to earn as much as men do in a year.

The most invisible is what they do before fishing, like weaving fishing nets.

"Times change, everything changes and I change too. Then you have to find some solution so you do not die of hunger."

Conditions

Escape

But I do not have any other choice. It is humiliating. I almost lost myself... Maybe it is a way out!

She planned to leave her parents' house and move to Tbilisi in neighboring Georgia where she hoped no one would pressure her just because of who she is.

Banu told me that a few days ago she was attacked by two young men near her house, which is far from the center.

On one hand, I feel frightened and scared. On the other hand, I am positively excited about the trip.

I made up my mind to reduce my dose of antidepressants, and eventually stop taking them.

Banu changed apartments three times, but eventually found a landlord who was nice to her and they even became friends.

She wants to find a good job with normal working hours, so it would be safe for her.

"I am tired of all these," she says, but quickly adds that there is no other life for women and she hopes her granddaughter will also grow up to be a housewife like her.

I used to buy and sell fresh fish from the fishermen's brigade. Then I made a counter near the bridge, covered it up, and continued working. Other women joined me, and the four of us started working together.

Now I'm thinking about making a place where I can fry fish for customers so they can dine in a clean area by the water. I will also employ young women.

They should have better conditions. Men are already appreciated. I pay women about 50 lari daily, but when there are very few fish, it's just 30 lari per day.

I would open my eyes to continue weaving the net. This activity saved me at that time.

In the 90s, when there were frequent power outages, I didn't go to bed.

The future

He works at Untitled Gallery. I shall also work with them. But Giorgi told me that they can not support me financially.

Banu told the story of Shahmaran, who had been betrayed by her lover.

Yesterday I contacted two model agencies in Tbilisi. They require my headshots. I should take them somehow and send them.

She is without her family and her friends, almost alone. But she is liberated.

I found a few paid fellowships that I can apply for. It could be a possible solution to survive for some period of time.

The curator of the above-mentioned exhibition wrote to her and invited her to perform at the Tes club in Tbilisi.

She received some messages from her family and relatives who still were concerned the neighbors might know that Banu is freely living her life the way she wants to and that doesn't suit the family.

We met in Tbilisi and I continued to photograph her.

Banu is a visual artist and performer, she experiments with photography, performance, video, sound and fashion to talk about issues such as identity, violence and transformation.

Accosted by some Azerbaijani women on the street who were unhappy about a transgender woman from Azerbaijan.

But at the same time she is not feeling safe.

She is looking for an apartment closer to the city center, because it seems safer to her and she thinks that people in central neighborhoods are less homophobic.

The traditions have become more difficult to maintain.

Some traditions, like growing *səməni* - germinating wheat grass seeds to grow grass for the table—have fallen by the wayside.

Amina, 20, is loath to perpetuate some parts of the tradition, especially the fact that the women do all the work.

I have a young child, and if I make something out of this business, it will be for him.

There is no life beyond this. I have always been limited in when I can come and go.

miro

6.4. Overview of the coding.

T=Themes, AC=Analytical codes

T	AC	Descriptive codes		
People	Assigned roles	Refusing to fall into accepted male or female roles makes you an outcast. She said that it was really a struggle to live in a society where even the color of your trousers, or wearing earrings can be a trigger for others. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	Even a floral tote-bag was enough to start a debate and become an issue. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	My alcoholic father wanted to hit me after seeing my new green shopping bag with the pronouns she/they. He was holding a knife. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]
		She said that I need treatment for my strange behavior. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	Raziya notes that life has been like this “since we first opened our eyes.” [Tati Sattar]	She spends hours in the kitchen and local market after she gets off work to ensure the family is ready. This is in addition to her normal cleaning and cooking, and the entire process has always struck me as unfair: why should the burden of these holiday feasts fall on her? [Tati Sattar]
		When men catch fish, they probably get paid a lot more, and they catch a lot of fish. However, they work in groups and have to share their income. And their wage is what?! They have so many expenses!		
	Invisible people	She is an economist by profession, and she worked for the private and public sectors for years before she lost her job. [Salome Kinkladze]	"Times change, everything changes and I change too. Then you have to find some solution so you do not die of hunger." [Salome Kinkladze]	For me, it is her labor—not the parties and celebrations—that define Novruz. [Tati Sattar]
Conditions	Escape	“I am tired of all these,” she says, but quickly adds that there is no other life for women and she hopes her granddaughter will also grow up to be a housewife like her. [Tati Sattar]	She planned to leave her parents’ house and move to Tbilisi in neighboring Georgia where she hoped no one would pressure her just because of who she is. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	Banu told me that a few days ago she was attacked by two young men near her house, which is far from the center. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]
		Banu changed apartments three times, but eventually found a landlord who was nice to her and they even became friends. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]		
		The curator of the above-mentioned exhibition wrote to her and invited her to perform at the Tes club in Tbilisi. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	I found a few paid fellowships that I can apply for. It could be a possible solution to survive for some period of time. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	Yesterday I contacted two model agencies in Tbilisi. They require my headshots. I should take them somehow and send them. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]

	The future	Accosted by some Azerbaijani women on the street who were unhappy about a transgender woman from Azerbaijan. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	We met in Tbilisi and I continued to photograph her. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]	She is looking for an apartment closer to the city center, because it seems safer to her and she thinks that people in central neighborhoods are less homophobic. [Sharaf Naghiyeva]
		Amina, 20, is loath to perpetuate some parts of the tradition, especially the fact that the women do all the work. [Tati Sattar]		

7. Visual Analysis

7.1. Samples



Photo by Sharaf Naghiyeva for “Alone, but liberated”



Photo by Salome Kinkladze for “Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry”



Photo by Tati Sattar for “Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations”

7.2. Semiotic analysis

“Alone, but liberated” by Sharaf Naghiyeva		
Visual components	Denotation	Connotation
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photo of a transgender easily noticeable in a background of a poor city. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The photo refers to the title of the project authored by Sharaf Naghiyeva – Alone, but liberated • The implication is the person in the photo is by herself but still free from the forcefully assigned gender stereotypes.
Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transgender women wearing easily noticeable pink blouse is the focus of the camera. • There are two people in the background wearing black clothes. • The background depicts a poor neighbourhood. • The sunlight is shining on the subject – transgender woman. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person challenging the societal norm can do so even by wearing colourful clothing. Hence, they are always noticeable. • In traditional societies, people strictly follow the norms assigned to them and try not to be noticeable. In contrast, they try to blend. Thus, they became a mass - darker background depicted in the photo. • The photo background clearly indicates the social and economic situation of the region, city or neighbourhood. • The sunlight on the subject of the photo refers to happiness and relief one might experience if breaking free.
Image attributes (color, lighting, saturation, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abundance of natural light 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showcases an ordinary summer day in the geographical location (in this case - Tbilisi).
Objects seen in the photo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small and poorly designed grocery shop • Writings in Georgian alphabet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration of poverty and socioeconomic factors. • Writings in Georgian alphabet indicate the photo was shot in Georgia.
Angle (positioning/gaze)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawn to the subject. • Then to the people in the background. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As this photo is about the liberation of one person, the gaze naturally is drawn upon the subject of the story. • The people in the background are complementing the photo and consequently, the story.

Modality (see below) Measuring truth and concealment in images	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blurriness in the bottom half of the subject and the person in the background. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implies that the photo was shot when the subject and the person in the background were moving, which means that this is documentary material portraying a person's or community's life. Hence, it conveys authenticity rather than scripted visual.
Mood/express	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Courage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While the background seems to express negative, darkness, and judgement, the subject of the photo displays a brightness which makes her even more noticeable in such an environment.

Critical reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The visual presents an ideology where not fitting into the cultural norms results in being an outcast. Emancipation might give a person power but this comes with a price. Being yourself means you are different and you easily get to be noticed in a society attached to its traditional values. Needless to say, at this point a person is being watched and is vulnerable to constant persecution.
---------------------	---

“Invisible labor: women in the fishing industry” by Salome Kinkladze		
Visual components	Denotation	Connotation
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A woman sitting at a fish counter with both hands on the cases full of fish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The woman is probably a fish seller working in a fish market.
Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A middle-aged woman with a tired facial expression smiling at the camera. There is a blurred image of a man standing in the background. There are fish, calamari, shrimp and other sea products in these cases in front of the woman. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The photo expresses the hard life and working conditions of a woman who is presumably selling the fish. The blurred image of a laughing man behind indicates that he is a buyer who is not aware of the hardships of the seller. Her holding on to two cases of sea products tells us the connection between the woman and the fish. This is her source of income, her source of survival.
Image attributes (color, lighting, saturation, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natural light, neutral colours, and the red colour of the lobster in the background grab 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send a message about the monotonous and ever-changing nature of this work, the woman's life, whereas the fish/red lobster

	the attention as the most vivid object.	symbolically represents the source of life/survival.
Objects seen in the photo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raw fish and sea products • Freezer in the background • The metal column with a bunch of plastic bags attached to it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The source of income and life is once more highlighted by the author. • The freezer in the background indicates that this is a regular location for selling the fish as it provides and opportunity to store the products. • Everything in the background tells the story of the business operation and the daily work of the woman.
Angle (positioning/gaze)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first look is directed at the woman. • The second is directed to the fish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The subject is the woman, the story is about her and her challenges. • The fish complements the story by providing a context for this story.
Modality (see below) Measuring truth and concealment in images	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woman's interaction with the camera and her smile masking the exhaustion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The woman understands she has been photographed and does not refrain from smiling though her interaction does not hide the fact she seems tired. The setting of the shooting conveys that the photo is authentic.
Mood/express	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhaustion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The facial expression of the woman gives away her troubles and hardships telling about her not-so-easy life.

Critical reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The photo is a visual expression of how a woman is facing challenges of economic and social existence. Survival is relied upon selling fish, so, a bond is created between the product and the seller. While this happens, it is possible to detect the feeling of being left and not being seen. • Although the project is named "Invisible labour: women in the fishing industry," the author directs the gaze of the audience toward the woman to give her visibility.
---------------------	--

“Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations” by Tati Sattar		
Visual components	Denotation	Connotation
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photo of a woman and a man sitting at the table in the darkness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The photo is a part of the photography series shot for the “Hidden hands of women behind Novruz celebrations” by Tati Sattar • The photo demonstrates a scene from the livelihood of a working-class family.
Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A woman is in the focus, colouring a holiday egg. • There is a man holding a light for the woman with his phone whose face is partially visible. • There is no electricity in the room. • The background suggests that there has been a tea party or similar. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The woman who colours the egg displays her role in the family and her contribution to the overall celebration of the holiday. • The man’s non-participatory image tells about how the men are not involved in direct preparation for the holiday. Nevertheless, they are expected to provide for the family. Thus, directing light to woman is an indication of that expectation. • Electricity shortcut presumably tells that this house or the room is located in a rural region. • Chocolate and a cup on the table with tea pot in the background tells about the evening of the family and how a woman’s duties are still not over.
Image attributes (color, lighting, saturation, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No natural light, dark background with dimmed colours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicates the life of a working-class family with busy evenings and fatigue.
Objects seen in the photo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old metal chimney • Old, soviet-style plate and bowls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration of poverty and socioeconomic factors. • Hint to the historical legacy – colonization by the Soviets
Angle (positioning/gaze)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawn to the subject who is the woman making the holiday eggs. • Then to the man holding the phone, directing the light to the woman. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The woman is highlighted as if she is the protagonist of the story. • The man’s role in this visual is mainly of a complementary nature.
Modality (see below)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaze of the woman and the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This implies the preoccupation of the woman with her household/Novruz

Measuring truth and concealment in images	<p>dirty tissue on the table.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shadow behind the woman. 	<p>duty, thus, telling the anticipated story.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lighting and the shadow behind the woman indicates that there has not been a modification to the photo.
Mood/express	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exhaustion and moodiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall composition talks about hard life of a woman.
Critical reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The photo presents a look into a life of an Azerbaijani family where a woman is a driving force in the household. This is a traditional division of the duties assigned at birth. No matter what are the conditions, a woman should find a way to complete her chores, as seen in the photo. A man is a provider of financial support, a kind of light holder, whereas a woman is the provider of comfort even in challenging conditions (like electricity shortage) or when working. 	