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This paper explores age-related differences in non-straight identities, using the concept of "generations" to investigate shared contexts and experiences contributing to processes of sexual identification. The process of identity construction is focused upon, existing research noting a shifting attitude towards identity categories among the youngest generations. Using a mixed-method design, first an exploratory survey of 684 Flemish men was used to determine shifting sexual identifications, which were indeed found among the youngest generation. These insights serve as a background for the analysis of 80 in-depth interviews with non-straight men across four generations: Baby Boomers, Generations X, Millennials and Generation Z. These generational divisions serve as a heuristic to explore shared generational experiences and contexts as well as intergenerational changes in relation to four key moments and themes: first realizations and explorations of same-sex sexuality; sexual identification; coming out; and involvement in the LGBTQ community. The results show clear and positive evolutions across the generations on all accounts, albeit with a lot of variation within generations as well as gradual changes between them. While useful as a heuristic, the notion of generations should be used with caution, as it allows to identify macro level shifts but hides micro level variations.

Keywords: generations; identification; non-straight men; coming out; social acceptance; media visibility; internet

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> "Can I ask you something? Why is your generation obsessed with labels? Obsessed."
> "Because what you call someone is important. It's about dignity, it's about visibility. I think we owe that to people. Especially when you come from a place of privilege."
> "So you look at me and you see, what? A rich white man, is that what you mean, is that my privilege?"
> "Yes, you are."
> "Let me tell you something about dignity and visibility. How old are you?"
> "28."
> "OK. Any so-called privilege that we happen to enjoy at this moment was won, OK. And by that, I mean clawed, tooth and nail, from a society that didn't give two shits if we lived or died. And indeed, did not care when all our friends started to die. When I was 28, I wasn't going to fucking dinner parties. I was going to funerals — three or four a week. All of us were."

In this poignant dinner party scene from the 2019 Netflix miniseries *Tales from the City*, based on the writing of Armistead Maupin, Ben, a twenty-something young black man, clashes with a fifty-something white man.[1] The conflict is framed as intergenerational, addressing the different historical and social experiences of LGBTQ people[2] and the ensuing differences in sensibilities.

The notion of a queer "generation gap" is gaining traction in popular culture and journalism (Roberts, 2018) as well as academic literature (Bitterman & Hess, 2021), the latter commenting in particular on growing problems in intergenerational communication among LGBTQ people (Nash, 2013). These are not only related to age differences but also to different life experiences, in response to social changes in LGBTQ rights and dramatic events such as the AIDS crisis (Hajek & Giles, 2002; Russell & Bohan, 2005). Vaccaro (2009) noted mutual perceptions of difference between Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials, despite strong actual similarities between these generations, but he also noted a clear difference in identity development,

the Millennials describing complex and fluid identities as well as negotiating multiple, intersecting identities (see also Cover, 2018).

This paper aims to further explore these intergenerational differences among LGBTQ people. First, theoretical insights on generations are applied to LGBTQ people, noting on the importance of social changes for processes of identity formation but also discussing the limitations and complications of the concept of generations. Subsequently, these insights are used to interpret the findings of a research project based on an online survey with 684 respondents followed up by 80 in-depth interviews with non-straight men aged between 18 and 75. These men belong to four commonly separated generational cohorts: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z. In the interviews, they narrated their process of sexual identity formation, from first realizations and explorations to processes of coming out. Drawing on established generational classifications as a heuristic device, this paper provides a thematic analysis of their narratives, aiming to identify generational commonalities and intergenerational differences but staying attentive to generational variations and intergenerational connections. In this way, the usefulness of the notion of generations is tested while simultaneously charting individual factors of variation.

LGBTQ generations and identities

In his essay "The problem of generations", Karl Mannheim (1952, originally published in 1927) provides the seminal sociological definition of generations, describing a generation as a number of individuals sharing a similar location in the historical dimension of the social process. While the biological (year of birth) is the basis for this location, the sociological is what really matters: the potential for certain shared experiences, which predispose members of a generation to certain modes of behavior, feeling and thought: "Mere contemporaneity becomes sociologically significant only

when it also involves participation in the same historical and social circumstances." (Mannheim, 1952: 298) Early experiences and impressions (around the age of seventeen) are particularly relevant according to Mannheim, as they create a "natural view of the world", giving meaning to later experiences (Mannheim, 1952).

Hammack and Cohler (2011) apply Mannheim's insights in LGBTQ research, investigating the impact of historical events and societal shifts in relation to same-sex attraction on the life course of individuals with same-sex desires. Among other things, they identify gay rights activism from the 1970s, the AIDS pandemic from the 1980s, and the advent of HIV treatment from the late 1990s as cohort-defining events. Parallel to that, discourses around same-sex-sexuality also shifted, from notions of "sickness" to greater acceptance and lessened stigma. Drawing on memoirs of American gay men, Hammack and Cohler (2011) distinguish three post-war generation cohorts: those coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s, who witnessed the change from silence and discourses of sickness to the emergence of a gay identity; those coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s, who witnessed the emergence of the "gay is good" discourse of the gay rights movement as well as the "gay plague" discourse during the AIDS crisis; and those coming of age in the 1990s, when homosexuality was increasingly presented as "virtually normal". As it became less stigmatized and more normalized, same-sex sexuality started to become a less salient and central aspect of identity.

In later work, Hammack et al. (2018) further developed this life course paradigm, combining insights on individual development with insights on shared social and historical contexts, adding more recent events such as the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision decriminalizing gay sex and the 2015 decision ruling same-sex marriage constitutional as key events. These and other historical events are experienced at particular developmental moments in an individual's life, in which Hammack et al.

identify two critical periods: puberty, when gay men typically recognize their same-sex desire; and emerging adulthood (18-29), when they typically become more sexually active and participate in community. Generations, then, are cohorts experiencing social and historical contexts in the same period of life. In the same line of thought, Martin and D'Augelli (2009) distinguish between cohort effects (birth cohorts sharing similar historical experiences at the same time in life) and period effects (social changes, such as shifts in attitudes, which different cohorts encounter at different periods in life), which are often hard to disentangle.

Still in reference to the American context, Bitterman and Hess (2021) adopt a similar perspective, identifying "LGBTQ+ generations" connected to the period individuals come of age, which they relate to coming out and forming a personal identity as an LGBTQ+ individual. As the latter can happen at different times in a person's life span, LGBTQ+ generations are less connected to the year of birth. Nevertheless, Bitterman and Hess adopt four existing generational categorizations based on the year of birth, renaming them in relation to the experiences of LGBTQ+ people: the Baby Boom Generation (born between 1945 and 1960) becomes the Liberation Generation; Generation X (born between early 1960s and early 1980s) the Out Generation; the Millennial generation (born between mid 1980s and early 2000s) the Proud Generation; and Generation Z (born from 2005) the Fluent Generation.

While Bitterman and Hess, like Hammack and colleagues, point out the importance of the individual's varying life course, they do take recourse to a generational classification based on the year of birth. This indicates a tension at the heart of the notion of generations: it is a generalization, suggesting homogeneity within a group sharing a period of birth, but it hides variation, based on personal experiences. Marshall et al. (2019) further explore this tension, acknowledging the insights gained by

adopting the concept of generations as a tool to study collective experiences, but questioning the homogenous application of generational labels to individuals, using a queer framework to highlight differences in the lives of individuals. Historical and social changes matter, but they do not impact all individuals in the same way. Marshall et al. (2019) suggest the notion of "queer generations" to encapsulate this tension between generalization and acknowledgement of individual difference.

One of the key intergenerational differences discussed in the literature on LGBTQ generations is that of sexual identification. In response to changing historical and social conditions, LGBTQ people in Western countries seem to identify in different ways, changing their attitude to existing labels, adopting alternative labels, or questioning labels altogether. In this context, Ghaziani (2011) among others talks about the "post-gay era", where gay people are assimilated in the mainstream while the community is increasingly internally diversified: "To be post-gay means to define oneself by more than sexuality, to disentangle gayness with militancy and struggle, and to enjoy sexually mixed company." (Ghaziani, 2011: 102) In particular, young people growing up in a context of greater acceptance of same-sex sexuality do not feel an equally strong need to identify in relation to sexuality, and they have access to an expanding array of discourses on sexuality (Hammack et al., 2009).

From the early 2000s, a great number of scholars have discussed the changing attitudes of younger generations of LGBTQ people towards sexual identity, mostly in the U.S. and other English-language Western countries. Savin-Williams (2005) was one of the first scholars to write about "the new gay teenager", for whom the process of sexual identity formation is increasingly smooth. Building on his work, Cohler and Hammack (2007) identified two competing narratives on sexual minority youth: on the one hand a narrative of struggle (with harassment and internalized homophobia) and

success (gay identity development); and on the other hand a more recent narrative of emancipation, focusing on increasing fluidity in self-labelling and on normality. Katz-Wise (2015) quantitatively confirmed the increasing sexual fluidity (defined here as changes in sexual identity) among sexual minority young adults (18-26), both among female (49%) and male (36%) respondents, suspecting a cohort effect as earlier research had not found similar numbers, certainly not among men. In the U.K., Coleman-Fountain (2014) qualitatively corroborated the increasing normalization of same-sex sexuality, stating that sexuality is increasingly seen as secondary to young people's identity, not only becoming more fluid but also becoming more ordinary.

Beside fluidity and normalization, young people also increasingly identify with other categories and labels. Russell et al. (2009) noted many non-heterosexual American high school students not identifying as gay or lesbian but rather as bisexual (37.3%), questioning (13.4%), queer (5%), or preferring other or multiple labels (10.2%). More recently, Watson et al. (2020) found 34% of U.S. LGBTQ youth (aged 13-17) to identify as bisexual, and another 26% with emerging labels such as pansexual, nonbinary and asexual. Using mixed-method research, Hammack et al. (2021) also qualitatively supported these findings, observing the growing importance of plurisexual and asexual identity labels (see also Clarke et al., 2018 and Szulc, 2019 for similar findings). In the Australian context, Persson et al. (2020) also identify a proliferation of sexual and gender identity labels, particularly circulated among younger people who increasingly question binary gender and sexuality systems. In their research, they distinguish between two "social generations", i.e. LGBTQ people embedded in similar historical and social circumstances: people born in the 1970s, who tend to identify more (but not always) with a single sexual identity, and people born in the 1990s, who identify more on a spectrum. Cover (2018) critically discusses the emergence of new

"micro-minorities" around new sexual identity categories and labels such as demisexual and pansexual, interpreting them as a generational process of resistance to earlier labels such as gay and lesbian, which nevertheless still very much operates in the logic of sexual categorization.

While a lot of research focuses on the shifting identifications of younger generations, older LGBTQ people are relatively under-studied. Pugh (2002) calls them "the forgotten", noting how older lesbians and gay men tend to be treated as a homogeneous group. Rosenfeld (2009a) does consider sexual identifications among American lesbian and gay elders through a generational lens, stating that the period when sexual identifications are constructed determines the availability of certain interpretive resources. In her research on men and women born before 1930, she discusses how they encountered and resisted the predominant discourses of homosexuality as stigma. Elsewhere, Rosenfeld (2009b) conceptualizes this process as "identity work", "the process of producing, elaborating, and enacting individual and group identity by invoking particular discourses (p. 125). Further elaborating on Mannheim's work, she defines "identity cohorts" as members of the same generation who were "born" as members of a subculture in a specific historical period with specific ideologies of self and community. These cohorts may subsequently encounter other ideologies and discourses, such as the "pre-Stonewall" generation which had to negotiate the gay liberationist discourse (valuing homosexuality) later in life, different members of the same generation responding in different ways. In a similar vein, Lyons et al. (2014) discuss how Australian gay men of the "gay liberation" generation experienced changes: increasing (but still limited) acceptance of gay men and importance of the internet, but also the devastating impact of HIV and loss of a sense of community.

As the account above illustrates, research on LGBTQ generations is promising as it may help to understand shifts in identification in relation to historical contexts. In particular cultural and historical contexts, certain narratives of social identity are available, which help individuals to make sense of sexuality in their personal narratives. (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). This view is premised on a social constructivist view of sexual identity, considering sexual development as a continuous process influenced by the individual's social context (Rosenberg, 2017). Individuals, then, do "identity work", performing and narrating sexual identity in different contexts (Greenland & Taulke-Johnson, 2017).

Despite these promises, more research on LGBTQ generations is needed as most of the current research focuses on younger people, and very little research considers multiple generations. An interesting exception is recent research by Bishop et al. (2020), who studied sexual identity milestones in three generations of U.S. sexual minorities. They found that the youngest cohort (aged 18-25), which they call the "inclusion cohort", reached milestones such as self-realization and disclosure earlier than the older generations, respectively called "visibility cohort" (aged 34-41) and "pride cohort" (aged 52-59). While very valuable, like most other research this study focuses on American LGBTQ people, so it is not clear to what degree similar generations occur in other cultural contexts. The demarcation of generations is another challenge: different timeframes and labels are proposed, which hinder comparison. The current paper aims to address these limitations by discussing an empirical research project not limited to younger people nor to the U.S., adopting widely used generational categorizations which allow for comparison. The main question guiding this research is: *How do processes of sexual exploration, sexual identification, coming out and community identification differ across four generations of Flemish non-heterosexual men?*

Methods

This paper explores intergenerational differences in sexual identification among non-straight men, drawing on mixed-method research. The research is set in *Flanders*, the northern, Dutch-language region of Belgium, a country with a good track record in relation to sexual minority rights, being one of the first to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003 (Borghs & Eeckhout, 2010) and ranking second in ILGA Europe's "Rainbow map" measuring LGBTI equality (https://www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope/2020). While it is not representative for all of Europe, the research does add a European perspective to the discussion about LGBTQ generations.

This paper draws on the most widely used *generational classification* also used (albeit with other names) by Bitterman and Hess (2021), adopting the age brackets identified by Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019): Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980; Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996; and Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012. This broadly used classification was adopted in view of the varied generational classifications used in LGBTQ research to date, which hinder comparison. Moreover, while more specific LGBTQ generational cohorts are distinguished in research, these are mostly based on American samples and social contexts. There is no available Flemish research identifying more culturally specific LGBTQ generational cohorts, but it is important to note that Belgium did not have a "watershed" event such as the Stonewall Riots, nor did same-sex marriage (approved in 2003) generate so much social debate. Therefore, the four generations defined by the Pew Research Center are used as a heuristic, aiming to identify patterns but also testing the usefulness of this generational classification in relation to Flemish LGBTQ people.

While mixed-method, the quantitative findings are mostly used to facilitate the qualitative analysis, which are prioritized. The quantitative data allow to ascertain *whether* there are statistically significant differences between generations in terms of sexual identification, but this paper primarily aims to explore *how* the experiences of subsequent generations differ. Thus, the paper is mostly premised on an interpretivist epistemology, aiming to understand human action from within (Bryman, 2012). In qualitative research in particular, reflexivity is of key importance (Ritchie et al., 2003), so I want to signal my own position as a cisgender gay male researcher belonging to Generation X. In the interviews, the shared sexual minority identification created a sense of trust among the interviewees, which added to my endeavors to make the interviewees feel safe (Kong et al., 2002).

In a first, exploratory step, an anonymous *online survey* was used to explore patterns of sexual identification among non-straight men in Flanders. The respondents were recruited through e-mail and social media, in particular calls for participation on the social media of LGBTQ organizations as well as sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram. The call specified that we were looking for non-straight men (gay, bisexual or other identifications). The research was limited to men, as masculinity was one of the central themes in the broader project (not reported upon here). The survey ran in October 2020, at a time when social contact was severely restricted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the questions explicitly addressed a wider period. The final sample consisted of 684 respondents. Beside several socio-demographic questions, the respondents were asked about their sexual and gender identifications. Data were analyzed using SPSS v 27.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY) by (name removed for peer review).

In a second step, from mid October 2020, *in-depth interviews* were conducted to further explore these issues. The interviews were relatively open, aiming to offer bottom-

up perspectives on processes of identity formation. While not oral history interviews in the strict sense of the word, the interviews spanned the participants' entire lives. The participants were invited to narrate their life in chronological order, focusing on key moments and contexts in relation to their sexual identity. They were recruited through the online survey, and 187 survey respondents volunteered to be interviewed. The candidates were contacted by age, starting with the oldest participants, aiming for a good spread across the four generations. The final sample consists of 80 participants, relatively evenly divided across four generations (see Table 1). The interviews were conducted in Dutch using Zoom, from October 2020 to January 2021, i.e., amid the COVID-19 restrictions in Belgium. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded by the author using NVivo v1.4 (QSR International). Drawing on inductive coding, a thematic framework was set up to organize recurring themes, concepts and categories emerging from the interviews (Ritchie et al., 2003). In a second round of analysis, all interview segments related to a similar topic (e.g. coming out) were compiled and analysed by generation, in order to identify generational patterns. Both the quantitative and the qualitative study received ethical approval of the ethical committee of (university name blinded for peer review).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Results

Quantitative patterns of identification

In terms of age, the 684 survey respondents ranged between 18 and 77 years old (mean age 34.29 years old, *SD* = 13.41). While the youngest generations were best represented, there was a good age spread: Baby Boomers (*n* = 71; 10.5%); Generation X

(*n* = 125; 18.4%); Millennials (*n* = 315; 46.4%); Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 (in this case 2002 as only respondents over 18 years old were able to participate) (*n* = 168; 24.7%).

The respondents were asked to indicate their sexual orientation(s), choosing one or more options from a list, or describing how they identified in their own words. 80.8% identified only as gay, the others preferring a wide range of (often multiple) identity labels (see Table 2).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

We explored whether there were significant differences between generations in terms of sexual orientation. For this analysis we recoded the sexual orientation variable into *gay* = 1 (*n* = 553; 80.8%) and *other sexual orientation* = 2 (*n* = 131; 19.2%), as the prevalence of individual sexual orientations other than "gay" was too low for meaningful statistical analysis. We found significant differences between the generations ($\chi^2(3) = 21.39$, $p = 0.00$, alpha .05) (see Table 3). Separate comparisons between generations showed that there were no significant differences among Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials, but that Generation Z respondents were more likely to identify with a non-heterosexual orientation other than gay compared to Baby Boomers ($\chi^2(1) = 8.77$, $p = 0.003$), Generation X ($\chi^2(1) = 13.25$, $p = 0.00$), and Millennials ($\chi^2(1) = 12.85$, $p = 0.00$).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Qualitative analysis of generational experiences

In this section, generational experiences as well as intergenerational differences will be

explored in depth, drawing on the interviews. Rather than discussing the generations separately, they will be jointly analysed in relation to a number of key moments and themes also identified in the broader literature on LGBTQ identity formation and generations.

First realizations and explorations

Across all generations, most participants realised they were not straight from an early age. While many had some experiences or did some experimenting at primary school age (6-12), secondary school (12-18) is when most situate their sexual awakening, i.e., during puberty. Nevertheless, the way these experiences were framed radically shifted between generations.

Baby Boomers, born before 1965, could not easily place these experiences as they did not have many reference points. They rarely knew any gay people, in real life or in media, and although most of them did know the word "homo" (Dutch equivalent of "gay") or were confronted with the slur "janet" ("faggot" or "sissy"), they had no real concept of its meaning. Homosexuality was hardly explicitly addressed, unless in a tone of scandal, and it was mostly associated with sin or flamboyance. Only after moving away from home, for instance to study, did most men of this generation start to explore their sexuality – although quite a few participants did remain closeted or in a relationship (sometimes marriage) with a woman for many years. Overall, the process from first realisations to actual explorations of same-sex sexualities was a long and uneven process for the Baby Boomers in this study. On average, they first realised they were not straight around the age of 17 (with a lot of variation), while most only came to terms with their sexuality after their mid twenties. For instance, Koen (born in 1963) said: "I already knew from my 15-16, but after that I have did not really do anything

with it. But you can't keep on living in the grey zone, so I thought 'I have to make something of my life' and then I went for it when I was 29 and I came out."[3]

For *Generation X* participants, born between 1965 and 1980, the social context gradually started to change. Although Belgium did not have a (symbolic) watershed moment like the Stonewall Riots in 1969, the LGBTQ movement slowly started to grow during the 1960s and 1970s, with a fall-back during the 1980s but rapid growth and major accomplishments from the 1990s (Borghs, 2017). Parallel to this emerging activism, the social and media visibility as well as acceptance of LGBTQ people started to rise (Eeckhout, 2017). The interviews reflect this transition, the older Generation X participants still talking about the invisibility and stigma around homosexuality when they were adolescents, while younger Generation X participants had more reference points while growing up. Nevertheless, all Generation X participants remember a period of isolation while growing up, not knowing many other gay people and struggling to accept their sexuality. Many Generation X participants felt attracted to or fell in love with men during secondary school (on average around the age of 14), but they hardly knew any other gay people and most repressed these feelings until they moved away from home for work or studies. While Flanders did not experience large-scale "gay migration" to urban centres in the 1980s and 1990s, as the U.S. did (Weston, 1995), Flanders being small and strongly urbanized, many LGBTQ people did and do move to bigger cities like Antwerp and Ghent, also among the participants in this study. Hendrik (1978): "I felt attracted to boys from a very young age. In fact, it has always been that way. And of course, in the beginning you avoid that, as probably any gay person. I came out rather late, I waited until after my studies. So I was about twenty then." While the whole process was a struggle, as it was for the Baby Boomers, small changes did start to make a difference, for instance knowing some out gay people, in real life or in

the media, which reduced the sense of being alone in the world. As a consequence, the process of acceptance went more quickly for these participants, compared to the Baby Boomers.

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, belong to the first generation fully taking advantage of the increased legal and social acceptance of homosexuality. Their adolescence and early adulthood is marked by a number of milestones in terms of LGBTQ rights: the start of annual Gay Pride marches from 1996; the passing of an anti-discrimination law in 2002; same-sex marriage in 2003; and same-sex adoption in 2006 (Borghs, 2017). Beside these legal changes, the social and media visibility of LGBTQ people also greatly improved during the 1990s. Most Millennials interviewed in this project started to realise their same-sex-attraction early in secondary school (around the age of 12), often still struggling for a number of years to accept it, but compared to the older generations the process went more smoothly. One key difference is that homosexuality was more visible, both in their daily life and in media, so participants had a better concept of same-sex sexuality but still struggled to reconcile with it. Pjotr (1993), who identifies as bisexual, started to realise he was different around the age of ten but had a hard time accepting the consequences: "I think that around the second or third year of secondary school, I came to the realisation that… I had a dream image of the future, with a house, garden, the typical story. And I started to wonder: is that not possible anymore?" Quite a few Millennials knew other gay people, either in class or in their immediate environment, which also helped to embrace their sexuality. One other key difference is the growing accessibility of the internet from the mid 1990s, which made it possible to explore homosexuality online, be it by searching for information, downloading porn, or by connecting to others using chat and dating sites.

Generation Z participants were born between 1997 and 2001, so they grew up with all the abovementioned legal and social accomplishments in place. Moreover, they were the first generation to grow up with full access to the internet as well as social media, creating a context of hyper-visibility of same-sex sexuality and easy access to like-minded people. Like the millennials, but even more so, Generation Z participants grew up knowing other gay people. All of this further speeded up the process from first realisation to exploration and acceptance of their sexuality, which mostly started in the later years of primary school (around the age of 10-11) and led to embracing their sexuality mostly some time during secondary school (12-18). Nevertheless, these participants still struggled, as Axel's (1998) account illustrates: "I already knew I was different from primary school, but then you're not really occupied with such things. It's only in secondary school, the third or fourth year, that I really started to worry about that and thought and read a lot. And then you read it's puberty and it's a stage and that it will pass. And I was waiting, waiting, waiting but it didn't pass. And then, by the end of secondary school I really realised I was mostly into boys."

Overall, we see clear differences between generation which, however, are rather gradual and testify to the variety within generations as well as the porous boundaries between generations. Across the four generations, we an observe several overarching evolutions in relation to first realizations and explorations: from later to earlier and from slower to quicker reaching of different milestones (attraction, self-realisation, sexual behaviour); from invisibility to visibility; from isolation to connection with others; from social and legal exclusion to inclusion; from stigma to openness; and from offline to online explorations.

Sexual identifications

The shifting process of sexual exploration is also reflected in changing sexual

identifications (see Table 1). Among the 16 *Baby Boomers* interviewed for this project, fifteen identify as gay and one as bisexual. While a few identified as gay at a very young age, most struggled to identify as such because of social norms and pressures. For instance, Chris (born in 1950) said: "I realised it very late, it's strange… I was really indoctrinated. (…) It really didn't cross my mind that I could be different." Geert (1951) was married for 17 years before he left the marriage to "search for himself": "I had to discover everything, I didn't know anything." Several participants mentioned needing therapy to come to grips with their sexuality, many being well over 40 before they really accepted it. For Leo (1958), who identifies as bisexual, the process was even harder as bisexuality was even more invisible and for a long time, he did not even know it was an option: "I only knew the two extremes, and not the whole spectrum in between."

Among the 18 *Generation X* participants, fifteen identified as gay, one as bisexual, one as queer, and one as asexual and aromantic. As indicated above, most of these participants still struggled for a long time to accept their sexuality, often repressing it. For instance, Oskar (1980), who was active in sports, said: "I really had a huge fight with myself. It's only at my 28th that I finally made that decision, that I thought: 'Just stop it now, it's really clear'." In part because of this struggle, their sexuality was a key part of their self-identity. When asked if his sexual identity took up a central position in his life, Frans (1965) responded: "I think it played a very determining role. (…) I think because it is something you have to come out with and you have to question things that other people do not have to question." Like the Baby Boomers, many did not grasp the concept of homosexuality when they first experienced same-sex attractions. For instance, Dennis (1975) had a poster of a male movie star in his room: "I had it on the wall and I was secretly in love with him, but I didn't know it

yet. I did not yet have a name for that." This was even more strongly the case for participants who now identify with other labels than "gay". Orlando (1976) identifies as queer and non-binary, but only discovered these terms relatively recently: "I always called myself androgynous. For instance, I made unisex clothes. (…) For me that was unisex or androgynous, and non-binary is something I discovered not so long ago. And I thought 'Ah yes, that's actually who I am'." Thomas (1978), who identifies as asexual and aromantic, spent a long time frustrated with the LGBTQ scene before he finally found information and a community of asexual and aromantic people online, around the age of 40.

Of the 24 *Millennials*, twenty participants identify as gay, two as bisexual, one as queer, and one as gay and queer. For many it was clear early on that they were not straight, and some were quite open from a very young age, such as Jonas (1992), who came out in his teens: "I've always been very open about that. And I've very quickly had the feeling of: 'I'm here, I'm queer, get used to it'." Others had a clear sense of being different but no need to label it, such as Alan (1991): "I had my sexuality and I experienced it but how to name it… I had a sense of: we'll see about that later. And I didn't worry about it." For Alan, as for many others of this generation, being gay was not a primary part of his identity. Millennials tended to question the concept "gay", some also identifying in other ways such as "queer". For instance, Emile (1995) embraced the label "queer" (which is much more uncommon in Belgium than in English-language countries) because he felt this label was more inclusive of the full range of the LGBTQ community. Like many other Millennials, he stressed the importance of social media like Facebook and Instagram in forming his ideas about gender and sexuality. Quite a few Millennials also questioned gender norms, particularly the youngest ones. Of the fifteen participants born between 1989 and 1996,

six identified as genderqueer, non-binary or genderfluid. While this is not a representative sample, it is telling that only one of the 44 men born before 1989 did not identify as male.

Of the 22 *Generation Z* participants, 14 identified as gay, two as queer, one as gay, queer and pansexual, and one as gay and polysexual. As with Millennials, we see sexual identification becoming less central to self-identity. For instance, Steven (1999) stated that his sexuality is not all-important: "Of course, that's a part of my personality and it's an important part, but it's not all I am." At the same time, the importance of sexual identity labels is questioned. For instance, when volunteering for the interview Nicolas (1998) identified as "gay" but during the interview he said, "Gay is the label if I have to choose a label." When asked if he would prefer not to choose a label, he said: "No, or rather queer", explaining that queer is a more open label to him: "That's why I feel more at home and more connected to lesbians, bisexuals, trans people, we're all just queer." Like many other participants of the younger generations, he mentions that his ideas about gender and sexuality recently shifted, partly thanks to social media such as Twitter or Instagram: "That's rather recent, because I became much more conscious that everything is a spectrum and fluid. For a long time, I labelled myself as gay. (…) While now, maybe because I'm more socially aware and have more information…"

Social media are also where many participants learnt about terminology, for instance "non-binary", or "heteronormativity" as is the case for Lowie (2000): "I actually got this term from social media and I'm really happy I got to know this term", adding that social media made him reflect on normativity in mainstream media and society. For Oscar (2001), who identifies as bisexual, transgender and male, social media such as Tumblr also allowed to explore his gender and sexuality. He first saw the term "transgender" in a list of sexual and gender identities online and used social media

to further learn about it and to read other people's experiences. Although all the Generation Z participants interviewed for this project identified as male, the interviews did reflect a fluid attitude towards gender.

Again, we can observe some overarching evolutions in relation to sexual identifications, albeit with a lot a variation within generations and gradual changes between them: from later to earlier self-realisation; from gay to a broader range of identity labels; from sexuality as a central aspect of identity to a more marginal aspect; from adoption of fixed gender norms to more fluid gender identifications.

Coming out

Among *Baby Boomers*, the protracted process of self-acceptance is reflected in their coming out, which on average started around the age of 31 (with a lot of variations). Most at least waited until they lived on their own (around the age of 22-23) to talk about their sexuality with family or friends. Despite their great fears, most parents responded rather well, often saying they already knew. For instance, Peter (born in 1958) recounts: "Actually that went rather well. They said, 'Yes, we actually already knew this for a long time.' It's good that it was said, but it was not talked about very much afterwards." This silence, not really talking about it even after coming out, was shared by many Baby Boomers. For instance, talking about his parents and sisters, Jozef (1954) says: "They knew but it wasn't talked about. It was really taboo, you know."

The *Generation X* participants tended to come out earlier than Baby Boomers, on average around the age of 23-24 – although some took much longer to come to grips with their sexuality, including Jan (1972), who identifies as bisexual and came out around the age of 45. Like the Baby Boomers, most Generation X participants waited until they did not live with their parents anymore before they came out, for instance when they moved to another city for studies. As for the Baby Boomers, the fear of

coming out was great, particularly towards parents, but the reactions were mostly positive, many parents suspecting it or even explicitly asking it. For instance, Arthur's (1979) father saw he was struggling when he was 16 and said: "I see you have something on your mind, you don't have to say it now, but I'm going to write it down, I'm going to seal that envelope, and later you will tell me." And indeed, two years later, when Arthur came out, his father fetched the envelope and the note said, "Arthur is gay."

The shifting attitude towards sexuality and gender among *Millennials* is also reflected in their coming out experiences. To start, this process was generally initiated at an earlier age, on average around the age of 17, so for many still in secondary school and while living at home with their parents. Despite the greater visibility and social acceptance of homosexuality, many participants still struggled to come out, such as Jay (1982): "I think it was mostly shame from my side, that I wouldn't be the son they had in mind. So it was more in my mind." Most first came out to friends before coming out to their parents, whose reaction they feared most – even if the actual reaction was mostly positive, even more so than among Generation X participants. In line with the diminishing centrality of sexual identity in their self-identity, as sketched above, some Millennials did not feel the need to come out. Willem (1996): "I talked about it and was open about it, but I never really felt the need to tell people: I am gay." Some were also inadvertently outed as they forgot to erase their browser history, a new but common experience for Millennials who started to explore their sexuality online.

Generation Z participants were even younger to come out, on average around the age of 15 or 16. As with the Millennials, but even more so, they grew up with the sense that being gay is not an issue. Lucas (1998): "That was one of the most normal things in the world for me. Also, because as a child, my parents always told me: if you

come with a girl that's OK, if you come home with a boy it's OK, if you come home with an alien that's also OK." Nevertheless, many still were afraid how their parents would respond, particularly their fathers. Another reason to postpone coming out was because many were not sure about their sexual orientation, such as Pieter (1999): "My family is really open and supportive, so I was never afraid to come out. But first I waited, just because I wasn't sure." Quite a few Generation Z participants were not sure about their sexual orientation at the time of the interview, some opting for broader labels as "bisexual" or "queer". Lowie (2000): "I always told people I am bi and that's a safe option because I can still go both ways (…). But recently I say I prefer not to put a label on it and will just see what comes." Like some Millennials, quite a few Generation Z participants did not really feel the need to come out. For instance, Joris (1997) is critical of the notion of coming out, adding: "I don't hide it, but I've often seen that if you tell people directly, they form an opinion about you and that's not necessary."

Again, we can observe some overarching evolutions across generations: from later to earlier coming out; from silence to a more open attitude among family and friends; and from coming out as a necessity to coming out as optional.

LGBTQ community

Parallel to the changing sense of LGBTQ identity, participants also engaged in a different way with the broader LGBTQ community, be it through associations or the more commercial scene of bars and clubs. *Baby Boomers* engaged with the LGBTQ community in variety of ways, which reflects their varied individual timelines of sexual exploration as well as the limited options available to them when they were younger. Some never attended activities of LGBTQ associations, others joined them later in life, still others became very active in associations themselves. For instance, Maupy (born in

1945) only visited and became active in an LGBTQ association when he was over sixty and left his wife, while Jonathan (1962) was very active in LGBTQ associations from his thirties. There was always a strong overlap between associations and the commercial LGBTQ scene, many associations having their own bars or parties, particularly in larger cities. Jozef (1954) often went out in Antwerp, going from the bar of LGBTQ association GOC to the gay bars in the (in)famous Van Schoonhovenstraat: “It was one bar next to the other, it was a party to go out. I think I went out almost every night”. Even if the options were limited when they were younger, Baby Boomers tended to be strongly involved in the LGBTQ community later in life.

The options for *Generation X* participants were more extensive. Many participated in the boom of LGBTQ associations in the 1990s, often going to weekly meetings to discuss and come to grips with their sexuality. One of the first things Bert (1976) did when he moved to another city for studies was to attend an LGBTQ association: “I knew they existed, I had already checked that during secondary school, but I had never attended. I think I attended the first activity of that association in October, right away in my first year.” Bars and parties were also available and important for this generation, to get in touch with other gay men, to make friends and to find partners. However, many participants commented on the gradual decline of gay bars, also reflecting their own changing needs. One of the youngest Generation X participants, Roeland (1980) said: “I have been in some gay bars and I still visit them. (…) But not so much, I really have a mixture of regular friends, colleagues and gay friends. It’s nice from time to time to go to a gay bar, with your gay friends, but not every week.”

Millennials were the first generation to have access to the internet while exploring their sexuality, which led them to LGBTQ associations at a much younger

age. For instance, Dieter (1986) attended an LGBTQ association for younger people while still in secondary school, and he participated in LGBTQ summer camp when he was around 18: “Looking back, that was a very important moment in my life, because it helped me accept myself.” At the same time, the internet also offered alternatives to physical meetings, such as online forums of LGBTQ associations but also commercial sites. Gradually, the importance of physical meetings started to decrease, online spaces fulfilling the need for information and connection. For quite a few participants, the threshold to join an offline meeting was much higher than exploring their sexuality online. Viktor (1986) never attended an LGBTQ association: “Looking back I know: that’s a pity, but I was too deep in the closet, I didn’t dare to come out of it. I didn’t have the confidence to do that. (…) But there was a site, called GayBelgium I think, that’s a site I did visit because it had other information apart from porn.” Similarly, for Millennials gay bars and clubs gradually started to lose their appeal, contact and dating sites offering an easily accessible alternative, which gradually became the first place to explore sexuality among this generation.

For most *Generation Z* participants, LGBTQ associations were not that important. Those who did get in touch with LGBTQ association mostly did it online first, or only. Olivier (1999): “When I came out, I looked around a bit and I found the site of Wel Jong Niet Hetero (the main LGBTQ association for young people in Flanders). I made an account on their forum, and I was a member for a few years.” Because of the lack of interest among younger people, one of the prime LGBTQ associations for young people, Enig Verschil in Antwerp, stopped its activities in 2020 after 27 years, illustrating the rise and decline of LGBTQ associations in Flanders which was also commented upon by many participants. Pieter (1999) never attended an LGBTQ association: “Not really, but that’s perhaps because I immediately felt very

comfortable with my sexuality, and my environment also didn't have a problem with it. I think those associations are more a support for people who are not really sure about their identity or not accepted by their environment." Similarly, gay bars and clubs were less important for participants of this generation. Tellingly, Dries (1997) said: "These bars are full of older people." Most Generation Z participants had a mixed group of friends and did not search out the company of LGBTQ people, apart from dating.

Across the four generations, again we can observe some overarching, gradual changes in relation to the LGBTQ community: from less to more LGBTQ associations and commercial venues; from more to less importance of these venues; and from purely offline to increasingly online participation.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper explored the heuristic value of a generational lens to investigate the experiences and identifications of non-straight men aged 18 to 75. Based on the assumption that generational cohorts share similar social and historical contexts at similar periods in life (Mannheim, 1952), four generations were distinguished: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z.

The quantitative findings largely support the changing patterns of identification among the youngest generations discussed in the literature review (Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Hammack et al., 2021; Katz-Wise, 2015; S. T. Russell et al., 2009; Watson et al., 2020). However, it is striking that this change is only significant for Generation Z, i.e. those born after 1997. This suggests that the shift in identifications is a relatively recent phenomenon in Flanders. While there is no comparable Belgian research to corroborate this observation, a recent survey by the Flemish LGBTQ umbrella association (Çavaria, 2017) among young non-straight people (not limited to men) attending secondary school (12-18 years old) found that only 32% identified as gay and 31.8% as lesbian,

many (also) identifying as bisexual (33.9%), pansexual (20.5%), queer (22.1%) or other sexual orientations (5.6%). A few years before, in a large scale survey in the broader population (average age 35.06, similar to our research), but using a different scale, Dewaele et al. (2014) found 74.3% of non-straight respondents identifying as gay or lesbian, 12.1% as more gay/lesbian than heterosexual, 8.5% as bisexual, and 5.1% as more heterosexual than gay/lesbian. These numbers suggest that the shift in identifications is relatively recent and mostly limited to the youngest generation.

The qualitative findings put these changes in context, adding insights on other sexual identity development milestones. Iteratively going through their life stories from old to young, clear generational differences came up, very much in line with those identified in the American context (Bishop et al., 2020; Bitterman & Hess, 2021; Hammack et al., 2018; Hammack & Cohler, 2011). Overall, each generation grew up in a socially more accepting context than the previous one, moving from stigma to normalization, which is reflected in an ever easier and earlier process of self-acceptance and coming out. We also witness the ever-growing accessibility of terms and narratives in relation to non-straight sexualities: from the gradually growing visibility of homosexuality for the Baby Boomers and Generation X participants, to the normalization of homosexuality and the introduction of alternative identity labels for Millennials and Generation Z participants. While becoming more self-evident, sexual identifications also become less salient, younger participants becoming less involved in the LGBTQ community and seeking more sexually mixed company. This very much echoes the "post-gay" mentality as described by Ghaziani (2011), homosexuality becoming more normalised and people seeking out a sexually mixed company. A generational lens, then, seems a very promising avenue for future research aiming to better understand evolutions and variations within the LGBTQ population, beyond more

established categorisations such as gender, class, or race, as well as for service-providers, who may need to differentiate more between the experiences and needs of different generational cohorts.

While mostly focusing on inter-generational similarities and cross-generational differences, the analysis also brought to light a great number of intra-generational differences, which testify to the limitations of the notion of generations. To start, they are generalizations which do not consider individual differences, not only in terms of personality but also in terms of immediate social contexts (e.g. the attitudes of family, friends, school, urban or rural dwelling etc.). Another limitation of the notion of generations is related to their definition and delineation: when does a generation start and stop? The extant literature suggests a number of different generational cohorts, using a wide variety of temporal markers related to social changes. In the Flemish case, there is no equivalent to the Stonewall Riots, but we do have a number of important legal benchmarks in the early 2000s (e.g. same-sex marriage in 2003). However, it is telling that these specific moments were hardly mentioned in the interviews, nor did the participants identify clear watershed moments in terms of societal acceptance. Social change in Flanders, as elsewhere, is a gradual process, so the specific boundaries of generations will always and necessarily remain somewhat arbitrary.

However, the interviews did disclose more noticeable and abrupt changes, which are mostly related to media visibility and access. In the life stages which are deemed most important in the literature on generations, adolescence and early adulthood, the Baby Boomers experienced media invisibility, hardly having any reference points. The Generation X participants form a transitional cohort, experiencing a gradual growth in societal and mainstream media visibility during their younger years. Millennials reached adolescence in or after the mid-1990s, a period of much greater mainstream media

visibility as well as the introduction of the internet, probably the single most defining generational benchmark as it greatly increased access to information, representations and connections with other LGBTQ people. This was only intensified for Generation Z participants, who had access to the internet and social media from a very young age, also exposing them to a greater variety of sexual and gender options (see also Cover, 2018). Compared to social changes, these media shifts are easier to situate on a timeline, largely coinciding with the four generations used in this paper.

The key role of the internet is also mentioned in passing in a lot of the literature on LGBTQ generations (e.g. Hammack & Cohler, 2011; Hammack et al., 2018b), but needs to be further explored. There is an extensive literature on the importance of the internet for sexual minorities, which however only rarely addresses its differential importance for different generations (for some exceptions, see Gudelunas, 2012; Robards et al., 2019). While a media-centric approach should be avoided, the importance of media and particularly the internet is undeniable, quite a few researchers identifying a sea change between a period "before" and a period "after" the introduction of the internet for LGBTQ people, highlighting its particular importance for younger people and in the period before and during coming out (author; Cavalcante, 2018; Fox & Ralston, 2016). Media in general and online media in particular were a key theme in the interviews for this project and are one of the threads to be further investigated.

Future research should also address some of the limitations of this study. While a large group of non-straight men have participated in the survey and the interviews, the invitation to participate was limited to (people identifying as) "men", so it does not offer sufficient insight in shifting patterns of gender identifications, let alone in generational experiences of LGBTQ women. While the study does add a novel (European) perspective to the literature on LGBTQ generations, Flanders is a specific social and

cultural context, so insights cannot be generalized to the rest of Europe, let alone the world. For instance, comparatively speaking Flanders is very accepting of sexual diversity, which may explain the rather positive coming out experience across different generations. Moreover, while the Flemish case, so far, offers a progressive account of positive changes for each generation, follow-ups will be necessary to detect potential backlashes due to right-wing and conservative forces gaining traction.

Due to the limitations of an article-length report, there are also many social contexts and individual complications which stayed on the background. For instance, as mentioned throughout the paper, many (also young) participants did struggle a lot to come to grips with their sexuality, so the overarching narrative of progress does not cover the diverse experiences of LGBTQ men in Flanders. This is one of the main shortcomings of the notion of generations, which it shares with other social categorizations: it helps to identify patterns at the macro level, but it obscures differences at the micro level. Other dimensions such as race and ethnicity, class, education, rural or urban dwelling should also be considered in further investigations. Ideally, research on generations should be complemented by individual life stories illustrating the idiosyncratic identity work done by individuals.

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Tables

	Baby Boomers	**Generation X**	**Millennials**	**Generation Z**
Sexual orientation	**16**	**18**	**24**	**22**
Gay	15	15	20	14
One or more other sexual orientations	1	3	4	8

Table 1: Number and sexual orientation of the interview participants per generation.

Sexual orientation	n (%)
Gay	553 (80.8%)
Bisexual	39 (5.7%)
Gay and bisexual	20 (2.9%)
Queer	5 (0.7%)
Queer and gay	23 (3.4%)
Bisexual and queer	2 (0.3%)
Gay and bisexual and queer	1 (0.1%)
Pansexual	7 (1.0%)
Pansexual and gay	2 (0.3%)
Pansexual and bisexual	2 (0.3%)
Pansexual and bisexual and gay	7 (1.0%)
Queer and pansexual and gay	3 (0.4%)
Asexual	2 (0.3%)
Asexual and gay	3 (0.4%)
Gay and bisexual and queer and pan	1 (0.1%)
Queer and asexual	1 (0.1%)
Gay and asexual and queer	1 (0.1%)
Heterosexual and gay	2 (0.3%)
Gay and heterosexual and bisexual and queer	1 (0.1%)
Other (i.e., grey ace, hetero-flexible, or unwanted gay)	3 (0.4%)
Other (i.e., sapiosexual, polysexual, or panromantic) and gay	3 (0.4%)
Other (i.e., demisexual) and queer and gay	1 (0.1%)
Other (i.e., demisexual) and queer and bisexual	1 (0.1%)
Other (i.e., biromantic) and asexual	1 (0.1%)

Table 2: Sexual orientation of the survey respondents.

	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials	Generation Z
Sexual orientation				
Gay	62 (87.3%)	109 (87.2%)	262 (83.2%)	116 (69.0%)
One or more other sexual orientations	9 (12.7%)	16 (12.8%)	53 (16.8%)	52 (31.0%)

Table 3: Differences in sexual orientation per generation among survey respondents.

[1] Accessible online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mu4naXsKsys.

[2] LGBTQ will be used as an umbrella term throughout this paper, but more specific terms will be used in the discussion of specific authors or identifications.

[3] All quotes are literal translations by the author. The participant names have been replaced by an alias of their own choice, and their year of birth is provided to situate them in their respective generational cohorts.