"A Community… Sounds Like Communism": Notions of Gay Community and "Community Belonging Contradiction" Among Bulgarian Non-Heterosexual Males

Shaban Darakchi

Published online: 03 Nov 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ⍐

Article views: 365

View related articles ⍐

View Crossmark data ⍐

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

"A Community… Sounds Like Communism": Notions of Gay Community and "Community Belonging Contradiction" Among Bulgarian Non-Heterosexual Males

Shaban Darakchi, PhD [a,b]

[a]Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences Sofia, Bulgaria; [b]Power in History Research Group, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

ABSTRACT

The term "gay community" has been criticized for its inability to explain the pluralities in a specific cultural and political context. Based on in-depth interviews with 63 non-heterosexual males in Bulgaria, this study aims to revisit the theories of gay communities in a non-Western, post-communist context. The data from this study suggest that (1) the idea of a "gay community" is often rejected due to anti-communist notions and explicit engagement with individualism as anti-communitarianism; (2) belonging to a gay community is subjective, and initial verbal detachment from gay communities does not indicate a lack of factual belonging to such communities; (3) the concepts of "personal communities" and "family of choice" remain relatively irrelevant in the Bulgarian context; (4) the most significant factor for attachment to a gay community is the notion of "gay culture" and "gay scene"; (5) recent forms of "sexual attachments" have led to a certain political involvement; and (6) the "anti-gender campaigns" have revitalized the importance of gay communities and have brought an increasing number of respondents to certain involvement in gay communities and networks, challenging the theories of "post-gay" societies.

Introduction

The development of gay communities is viewed as a direct result of the changing economic landscape during the twentieth century, as migration to larger cities intensified (Escoffier, 2018), women entered the labor market (Adam, 1985), and some of the first "gay ghettos" (Levine, 1979) were established by groups of sailors in cities such as San Francisco, New York, and Sydney during and after WWII (Robinson, 2008). These conditions enabled many non-heterosexual people to unite, live together, support each other, and share common values, leading to the proliferation of bars, saunas, parks, and branches of the economy occupied mainly by non-heterosexual individuals (Murray, 1992). Many authors argue that the development of gay communities

intensified as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic during the last two decades of the past century, when the communities became the most important actors for political pressure and support (Holt, 2011; Kippax et al., 1993; Woolwine, 2000). Furthermore, the rapid development of gay communities in recent decades is defined mainly by consumer culture, media, the Internet, and social media (Martel, 2018), creating global gay identities (Altman, 1996) and communities (Adam, 2001). As a result, the notions of "gay communities" are constantly being redefined (Martel, 2018; Seidman, 2004).

There are many challenges regarding the meaning and usage of the term "gay community" (Wilkinson et al., 2012). On the one hand, the term has been criticized for its incapacity to explain the pluralities within a specific cultural and political context. On the other hand, it has been incorporated into the term "LGBTQI+ community," which presents further challenges regarding its use in science and practice. Despite this criticism, the scholarship exploring the ambivalence of the term remains insufficient (Holt, 2011), and the concept of gay community remains a "pressing sociological issue" (Wilkinson et al., 2012).

Based on in-depth interviews, this study aims to revisit the theories of gay communities in a non-Western, post-communist context. The main goal of the study is to investigate the ambivalence about gay communities in the Bulgarian context, taking into account the country's communist past and the transition to democracy. The study pursues its main goal through three main questions: (1) What are the main milestones in the development of gay communities in Bulgaria? (2) What are the notions of "gay community" and "scene" among the study's respondents? and (3) What are the ways of belonging (attachments) to gay communities?

Theoretical approaches

The ambivalence about gay communities

While early theories on gay communities focused on their territorial aspects, structures, and functions (Adam, 1985; Levine, 1979), scholarship in recent decades has questioned the homogeneous use of the term "gay community" while exploring the pluralities (Holt, 2011; Woolwine, 2000) of the communities and their subjective meanings. Gay communities are not only "gay ghettos" as a shared territory and common lifestyle, but also places where individuals interact, create networks, tell stories, and exchange ideas (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). These interactions lead to the reorganization of these communities (Plummer, 2002). Therefore, two main distinctions need to be made to understand the subjectivity of gay community: (1) the difference between "gay community" and "gay scene," and (2) the subjective understanding of gay community.

While gay community is "defined socially, commercially, and politically" (Altman, 1996), the "gay scene"is a place for young, partying, fashionably dressed people, where appearance is a leading criterion for belonging and performing non-heterosexual identities (Robinson, 2008). Although "gay community" and "gay scene" are often used interchangeably in public debates, this distinction is crucial not only in a different cultural and political context but also in the analysis of the dynamics of gay communities and their purposes. For some, "the gay scene" might be the only type of engagement with gay communities (Altman, 2001), while for others, it can be a transition from "youthful, partying" venues that often exclude certain groups based on race, ethnicity, or appearance (Coleman-Fountain, 2014) to social services, support groups, activism, social causes, volunteering, and other activities that form the core of a community (Robinson, 2008).

Furthermore, the subjective understanding of "gay community" focuses on different types of gay communities. Woolwine (2000) has outlined *three different types* of gay communities shared by the respondents in his study. The first type is the "*imagined gay community*," which is based on common beliefs, lifestyles, and interests. The internet and social media have intensified this understanding of community (Martel, 2018). The second type is the "*community gathered around organizations and activism*", and the third type is the "*community of friends*". Furthermore, Holt (2011) has criticized the conceptualization of "gay community" as a linear and homogeneous entity and instead proposed the concept of "personal gay communities," defined as networks of friends, family, colleagues, and relatives where one enjoys the freedom of self-expression and support. These personal communities are also considered an alternative to belonging to a gay community, or "scene."

Gay community attachment

The scholarship on gay communities has been interested in how, why, and whether non-heterosexual people belong to a certain community (Holt, 2011). Developed by public health research related to the significance of the gay community in HIV/AIDS prevention and political mobilization, the concept of gay community attachment has been a leading approach in theories on the gay community for the past few decades. It was discovered that stronger community attachment leads to better awareness of STIs (Kippax et al., 1993). There are three main ways of involvement in gay communities: sexually, socially, and politically (Kippax et al., 1993), and they are distinct. Some people may be involved only sexually, especially those who do not identify with gay culture (Connell, 1992), while others prefer to socialize in non-heterosexual environments and participate in organizational activities.

The attachment to gay communities also greatly depends on social class. Previous studies have concluded that those who come from a higher social class are more likely to identify with gay communities and participate in their activities (Barrett & Pollack, 2005). Similarly, Escoffier (2018) has argued that those who gravitate toward "gay ghettos" might have more resources compared to their working-class counterparts. The initial gay communities provided better opportunities for personal and professional development. More educated professional environments allow for coming out, and higher income and the cultural codes of gay communities allow for better self-expression and personal development compared to the working class, who might have lower economic chances and a history of violence in their families, which is reproduced in their relationships, often driven by macho masculine performance and stereotypes (Barrett & Pollack, 2005). However, these findings are challenged by the increasing importance of "imagined communities" (Holt, 2011), where the "gay ghetto" might not be such an important criterion for belonging, compared to the increasing role of the Internet and social media and the pluralities of gay communities (Martel, 2018).

Gay community subjectivities

Challenging the monolithic concept of one single gay community, the queer scholarship emphasized that subcommunities (Peacock et al., 2001), non-heterosexual subcultures, and performativity (Gamson & Moone, 2004) provide yet another understanding of non-heterosexual lives and experiences. These more recent approaches identify gay community as a "multi-constitutive model," where gay community is an umbrella concept of different subgroups characterized by cultural heterogeneity. The subcultures and subcommunities are also a question of self-identification and subjectification. One might not identify with a specific community; however, they might be identified and allocated to it by "the others." This interaction often leads to the exclusion and discrimination of some marginal subcommunities, which are objectified as "deviant" and "inappropriate" (Peacock et al., 2001).

Furthermore, some authors are dissatisfied with the community attachment approach and are exploring the idea of community beyond its "sexually bounded collectivity." Different scholars (Gamson & Moone, 2004; Holt, 2011; Stein & Plummer, 1994; Weeks et al., 2001; Wilkinson et al., 2012) have argued that "personal gay communities" (defined as networks of friends, family, colleagues, and relatives where one enjoys the freedom of self-expression and support) explain better the structure of the non-heterosexual community relationships. Friendship among non-heterosexual males is a significant aspect of "community" life, and friendships often arise from sexual encounters. Empirical research suggests that non-heterosexual males feel most comfortable expressing their feelings to other non-heterosexual

males and especially to female friends (Wilkinson et al., 2012). Similarly, while families are preferred in terms of trust, reciprocal response, and financial hardship, the respondents prefer other non-heterosexual males when it comes to emotional support (Wilkinson et al., 2012), which is a sign of emotional attachment and closeness based on sexual preferences.

The concept of gay community in an Eastern European context

"Personal communities" are also considered an alternative to belonging to a gay community or "scene" and align with the "post-gay era" (Ghaziani, 2011), where the sexual is not the leading motivation to socialize and integrate into different sub-groups and sub-cultures. However, these conclusions are based mainly on the Anglo-American context and often create a narrative of "undisrupted progressiveness" (Mizielińska & Stasińska, 2018). These results, therefore, need to be methodologically contextualized (Stella, 2015) in different non-Western discourses instead of being used as universal categories for analysis and social policies. Besides, the early theories on gay community have emphasized the unifying, consolidating, and supportive character of the gay community; however, the debates on the differences (Heaphy, 2008) and the "community conflicts" might be a useful approach to identifying tensions, discrimination, and polarization when analyzing the social organization of non-heterosexual people in a globalizing world, taking into account the political and cultural context as well as the "ordinary" non-heterosexual experiences outside of urban cosmopolitan contexts (Brown, 2012).

In the Eastern European context, the term gay community has been widely used in scholarship and is being incorporated into the term "LGBTQI+ community/ies." The existing scholarship does not pay significant attention to the relevance of the term and the ambivalence toward it in the post-Soviet context as an imported concept (Harvey, 2000). Due to focusing on the similarities rather than the "differences" (Heaphy, 2008), the account of non-heterosexual communities in Eastern Europe might disregard important processes emerging in local contexts. These include (1) the "privatization" of gay identity" and "othering" by the state (Kuhar et al., 2013); (2) symbolic erasure, lack of institutionalization, and strategic invisibility of non-heterosexual people as a way to maintain non-heterosexual networks in a hostile environment (Stella, 2015); (3) close ties with families of origin due to cultural reasons and economic hardship (Béres-Deák, 2019; Mizielińska, 2022); and (4) the importance of successful intimate partnership "as a buffer against social homophobia" (Mizielińska, 2022). In order to contextualize the Bulgarian experiences of gay communities and networks, taking historical and regional perspectives, we need to consider five important socio-economic phenomena.

First, the communist notion of the "communitarian" in Bulgaria was rapidly replaced by notions of individualism and particularism (Marková, 1997) after

the fall of the communist regime in 1989. For that reason, "communitarian" as an inseparable part of communism (Heywood, 2017) was associated with authoritarianism and repression by many (Marková, 1997), including the first gay and lesbian organizations and activists until 2010 (Darakchi, 2021). This context is strikingly different than that of the USA, where, despite the rising influence of individualism (Wilkinson et al., 2012), public life is well organized around communities: religious, school, neighborhood, work, and other communities. Grassroots *community organizing* remains a core approach to social activism in the USA (Beck & Purcell, 2020), while in Europe we witness "NGO-zation" of LGBTQI+ activism (Paternotte, 2016). *Second*, belonging to a gay community might not be influenced by social class, as claimed in some studies (Barrett & Pollack, 2005; Escoffier, 2018), given the discrepancies between occupation and payment in the Bulgarian context described in the method section. *Third*, some people do not recognize the notion of *coming out* as necessary in the Bulgarian context, and some others are afraid to come out. This would be a serious obstacle to the development of "gay personal communities" (Holt, 2011), which include family members and non-heterosexual colleagues and friends. *Fourth*, the emergence of LGBTQI+ organizations as NGOs is based on project funding and *individualistic* principles (Darakchi, 2021) rather than a wide community response to oppression and crisis (Murray, 1992). *Fifth*, the rapid development of anti-gender campaigns, which attack non-heterosexual identities, community activities, and organizations in Bulgaria within the last 4 years (Darakchi, 2019), has created a backlash and yet another wave of repathologization of homosexuality, which bears the potential to strengthen notions of detachment from gay culture and civic activism. These questions remain central to understanding the structure and development of gay communities in the Bulgarian context, outlining historical, cultural, and political developments.

Method

This study uses a qualitative research methodology. In-depth interviews (semi-structured questionnaires) combined with a narrative approach assure the "trajectory of life across time", depth, and coherence of the accounts (Carless & Douglas, 2017). I interviewed 63 self-identified non-heterosexual males in the period June 2020–April 2021. The language of all the interviews was Bulgarian. The respondents chose the place for the interview. The interviews lasted from 1 hour and 34 minutes to 4 hours and 47 minutes. The respondents' names were anonymized.

I used a combined sampling procedure. For the initial contact with different respondents, I consulted the LGBTQI+ organizations GLAS, Bilitis, and Deystvie and my networks. This is how I got into contact with 8 people of diverse backgrounds and community involvement. A snowballing procedure

based on the initial contacts put me in contact with 13 more people. Based on the recommendations given by the last group, I made contacts with additional 22 people. I contacted the remaining 20 respondents directly on Facebook after some observation of the comment sections on two Bulgarian LGBTQI+ Facebook groups, taking into account diverse opinions regarding LGBTQI+ politics and events and different demographic statuses presented in Table 1.

When it comes to education status, it must be noted that a higher educational status does not automatically guarantee a better-paid or more highly qualified job. Of those 49 people who reported a higher education degree, 27 were the first generation to obtain a higher degree diploma. The figures confirmed that higher education does not always result in a well-paid job position. Some of the respondents with higher degrees were manual workers, such as waiters, cleaners, or cooks. Due to the wide access to comparatively cheap higher education, a very high proportion of the people in Bulgaria have obtained a higher degree. On the one hand, the labor market cannot provide enough opportunities for all; on the other hand, people in some professions, such as waiters, earn more than those working in public administration, state schools, and even hospitals in certain cases.

Identifying generational similarities based on interactions between historical events and personal experiences in studies devoted to non-heterosexual people is a challenging task given the variety of subjective experiences (Dhoest, 2022). The generations identified in other studies (Cohler & Hammack, 2006; Dhoest, 2022) based primarily on key historic events such as liberation movements, Stonewall riots, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and others would be rather irrelevant in the Bulgarian context due to the isolation of Bulgaria from the

Table 1. Demographic data of the respondents.

Age range: number of respondents	Generations	Ethnicity	Self-defined Sexual orientation	Place of living	Degree of Education
18–24: **8** 25–29: **9** 30–39: **18** 40–49: **17** 50–64: **7** +65: **4**	**G3** – 12 respondents	Bulgarians: 8 Turkish: 1 Roma: 2 Armenians: 0 Jews: 1	Gay (gey): 8 Homosexual (homoseksualen): 0 MCM (*mazh, koito spi s mazhe*): 1 Man/Male: 2 Queer (*kuiar*): 2	Capital: 4 Big city: 4 Small town: 4	Higher (*at least 4 years, including students*): 11 High school: 1 Primary school: 0
	G2 – 29 respondents	Bulgarians: 22 Turkish: 2 Roma: 3 Armenians: 1 Jews: 1	Gay: 13 Homosexual: 3 MCM: 6 Man/Male: 5 Queer: 2	Capital: 9 Big city: 13 Small town: 7	Higher: 24 High school: 3 Primary school: 2
	G1- 22 respondents	Bulgarians: 19 Turkish: 2 Roma: 0 Armenians: 1 Jews: 0	Gay: 7 Homosexual: 7 MCM: 2 Man/Male: 5 Queer: 0	Capital: 11 Big city: 7 Small town: 4	Higher: 15 High school: 5 Primary school: 2

"Western world" before 1989 during communism. For the analysis, based on the data and taking into account the small number of people born before 1975, this study will distinguish between:

Generation 1 (G1): those born before 1980 who came to terms with their sexuality during communism with very limited access to information and limited possibility for open self-expression.

Generation 2 (G2): those born between 1980 and 1995 who had access to books, magazines, pornography, TV programs, and later the Internet during their coming of age. On the one hand, this generation grew up during the first decades of "democracy," the emergence of the first gay and lesbian organizations, including the first Gay Pride, and the accession of Bulgaria to the EU. On the other hand, this was a period of "legitimization" of the nationalistic parties and the religious institutions that contested the liberation of sexual freedom.

Generation 3 (G3): the respondents born after 1995 who grew up in times of expanding Internet and unlimited access to social media, movies, international mobility, and increasing involvement in LGBTQI+ activism and networks

The data were analyzed with NVivo research software. I transcribed all the interviews as a precaution that this information would not end up in inappropriate hands and threaten the respondents' well-being. Using thematic analyses, I outlined the main patterns and milestones discussed by the respondents.

The main limitation of this study is related to accessibility and representation. Although I searched for respondents from diverse backgrounds, I might not have included experiences from hard-to-reach groups, such as people who refused to be interviewed (6 people), and they might represent models and patterns that were not included in the following analysis. Another major limitation is the small number of people born before 1975 willing to give an interview. This might also have led to a limited "restoration" of the past.

Results

The emergence and development of a community

This section explores the structures of the Bulgarian non-heterosexual male communities: "places, institutions, and mobilization" (Adam, 1985) within the socio-economic and political context (Escoffier, 2018) in Bulgaria based on the respondents' stories and an archival study (Gruev, 2006). The timeline is divided into four main periods:

Before 1990, non-heterosexual relations and practices remained forbidden by law in communist Bulgaria until 1976, when the new Penal Code declared them a disease that must be cured instead of being prohibited (Gruev, 2006). The data suggest that the main "community" places where non-heterosexual

males met were the public baths and toilets. Located in Sofia and the big cities, public baths played a significant role in the establishment of a network of people who had sexual encounters. The baths remained primarily "places for sex," and therefore did not facilitate significant social interactions as the contacts outside of them were limited due to precautions. There were two main "places" that facilitated the building of social networks: the beaches by the city of Varna, where some of the respondents used to meet every summer and contact people from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other Soviet countries, and "*Kultura*" cinema in Sofia. Under the guise of beach and cultural activities, many people found intimate relationships and established a wider network of friends.

Generally, there were two main categories among non-heterosexual males: by sexual positions: "bottoms" (пасивни) and "tops" (активни) and by social prestige: "classy" and "toilet queens (тоалетни кралици). The division by sexual position involved patriarchal discourses in the interactions (Adam, 1985), where those who were the receptive partners in intercourse were often called female names, and they often imitated "female behavior." When it came to privilege and financial and social capital, those who grew up in families close to the *nomenklatura* had access to resources (books, movies, music, and travels abroad), which served as a criterion for segregation often expressed by a sense of superiority. Such is the case of Mihail (age 78), who comes from an intellectual family in Sofia and who speaks with a certain degree of disgust about the "toilet queens" while disassociating himself and his network from regular sexual practices in toilets and emphasizing intellectual activities as a component of the "classy homosexual." In contrast, Georgi comes from a working-class family and describes his background as an advantage in the case of a police raid against violations of social morals, which was the main grounds for prosecution after the decriminalization of non-heterosexual activities.

> I know there were circles around actors, doctors, and other important people, but I never managed to get into one; many people tried to get into these. I was in the toilets with ordinary people, and I loved it. I was arrested once, but nobody cared because my parents were not even party members; I was not afraid so much. Georgi (64)

While resistance movements and gay culture developed as early as the 1970s in other Eastern European countries within feminist and anti-war movements (Szulc, 2018), there was no documented resistance movement in Bulgaria before 1992. Additionally, due to the isolation from the West, the first cases of AIDS in Bulgaria, which were registered in 1986 among supposedly heterosexual sailors, did not bring significant "community pressure" (Kippax et al., 1993). According to some of the respondents, they only learned about the real situation with HIV/AIDS after 1989 because the communist regime claimed that HIV was a "Western virus" due to the "promiscuity and moral

degradation" in the USA. According to one respondent, there was a commission dealing with the first cases of AIDS; however, no official documents have been found yet. Similarly to other Soviet countries, the lack of institutionalization of gay communities (Schluter, 2019) did not allow the establishment of stable institutional and network venues and events.

1990–2000: After the fall of the communist regime, in 1992, a small bar named *The Blue Oyster* opened its doors in downtown Sofia, close to the cultural institutions. *La Strada* was another small gay venue that was known mainly among a "select audience". In 1993, another small club known as *Tsar Boris* opened its doors above a sex shop. This was the first place to be "open" for different audiences. According to the respondents, the owner had contacts with the Roma community, and they were welcomed there. That place had screens projecting gay porn and a tiny "dark room" space. Later, *The Purple Society* and a bar near the *Ivan Vazov Market* in Sofia existed for a short time. Those spaces no longer existed by 1995. The first venue that attracted significant media attention was *Spartacus Mix Club*, which opened in 1996. Being advertised as a "mix club", *Spartacus* gathered varied audiences; however, the strict "face control" policies turned the place into an "elite" club, hosting only people who could afford the prices and were dressed in a "proper manner". *Spartacus* dominated the gay scene until 2005, when it closed its doors. At almost the same time, a small bar named *Kayo* was opened; it worked for 4 years. To summarize the respondents' memories, there were two main features of the gay club venues between 1992 and 2000. First, these venues were financed by the criminal underground in an attempt at money laundering; second, they remained exclusively elitist, being located in the capital and accessible to white, mostly rich, ethnic Bulgarians.

Meanwhile, the rising number of cases of HIV/AIDS provoked the first political community reactions, and in 1993, the first lesbian and gay organizations, BULGA and Gemini, were established (Darakchi, 2021). While BULGA soon discontinued its activities, the male-oriented Gemini focused largely on HIV prevention until 1997 by organizing workshops and campaigns in close cooperation with other international organizations. Another significant milestone in this period was the severe economic crisis and the ensuing protests in January 1997, which brought politically active non-heterosexual people into contact. These activities brought people from different backgrounds together, and this set up the beginning of the community's social and political mobilization (Darakchi, 2021).

2000–2010: During this decade, community mobilization was marked by a diversification of community organizations and the proliferation of "the scene." *Spartacus* remained the main gay scene in the country, sharing its popularity with Bar *Luna*, which existed between 2004 and 2006. During this decade, *Spartacus* opened a branch in the "seaside capital" Varna, and *Mix Club Caligula* opened its doors in Plovdiv, which gave larger groups of people

a chance to join the scene. Around 2005, the *Why Not Bar* became an alternative space in the capital Sofia for those who would not be allowed into the "elitist" scene: Roma, sex workers, and other marginalized groups. In 2006, when *Spartacus* closed its doors, its place was taken by another "mix club" called *ID*, which became the main male scene until 2014.

Another major factor that led to the enlargement of the socially bounded community was easier access to the Internet and the forums of "gay. bg" and "momcheto. bg." The first popular dating websites, *Elmaz* and *Romeo* enabled many people who did not live in Sofia to make friends and meet lovers. Sofia became a place for occasional visits and increased incoming mobility, offering "freedom" of expression and community activities.

Those processes were further intensified by the changing political climate, which became formally inclusive due to the upcoming membership of Bulgaria in the EU in 2007. The records show that most of that rhetoric remained empty promises; however, the requirements for EU membership contributed to the first Gay Pride in Bulgaria, organized by Gemini in 2008, a year after Bulgaria became a member of the union. Gemini underwent several scandals and community conflicts and ceased to exist in 2008; its place was taken by Bilitis, an organization dealing with women's and trans issues. The annual Gay Pride events constituted a wider politically engaged community, and that resulted in the foundation of the first LGBT youth organization called Deystvie in 2010. The same year, ID Club opened a branch in Varna.

2010–2020: Following the expansion of organizations and scene venues, the next decade brought rapid changes to community development. During its first half, until 2015, most of the scene venues disappeared, including two "gay saunas" that had opened between 2008 and 2012. Many respondents in this survey describe that period as a setback to what was achieved in the previous two decades. The proliferating gay scene ceased to exist very rapidly, which was partially due to the (1) increasing popularity of dating apps; (2) lower traveling costs, which allowed many people to attend gay parties abroad; and (3) significant emigration within the EU.

An important milestone in this decade is the establishment of community initiatives such as the Sofia Queer Forum and informal student groups that challenged the dominant liberal discourse of "queering" not only of community development but also of the scene. Two new NGOs were founded: the GLAS Foundation in 2013 and Single Step in 2016. These organizations attracted new audiences of predominantly young people on social media, which strengthened the political aspects of the community. At the same time, in 2016, a coalition partner of the government, the nationalistic party VMRO, started increasing homophobic public rhetoric. Since the beginning of 2018, several nationalistic entities and the Bulgarian Socialist Party have been actively participating in anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria (Darakchi, 2019). The aggressiveness of these campaigns redefined notions of community

involvement for many respondents in this study. The youngest ones were brought into the community networks in a context of public political and religious attacks against sexual minorities while having at their disposal four active LGBTQI+ organizations, the first "community space" Rainbow Hub, and the main scene venues *Barcode* and *The Steps* (the latter later owned by Single Step), both of which hosted parties and community events inclusive of trans, bi, and intersex people. All of these community spaces and activities and the backlash against the anti-gender actors resulted in a rising number of people attending the annual Gay Pride events in Sofia. Despite the establishment of organizations, Gay Pride events, and different types of networks, non-heterosexual issues remain a "private issue" for the Bulgarian state, and non-heterosexual people are being constantly "re-pathologized" (Darakchi, 2019).

Currently, there are two Facebook groups (names not provided for security reasons) with 1200 members combined that are mainly for those who seek sexual partners or encounters in public baths, cruising spots, organized hiking, or other types of activities. On the other hand, the scene venues, community spaces, and the biggest LGBTQ+ Facebook groups (with more than 5000 members) are spaces for social interaction, cooperation, and political discussions and initiatives. The recent anti-gender campaigns and the diversified community organizations' policies have led to the emergence of the most politicized and constantly growing non-heterosexual communities in Bulgarian history, which challenge the theories predicting the decreasing importance of "gay community" (Wilkinson et al., 2012) and the rise of personal communities (Holt, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2012).

Notions of gay community and the "belonging contradiction"

Taking into account the socio-economic changes in Bulgaria within the past few decades, in this section, I explore the notions of "gay community" among the respondents in this study. How do they imagine a gay community, and how do they describe it? First of all, from a linguistic point of view, the term "community" in the Bulgarian language is *общност* (obshtnost); it resembles the term "society," which is *общество* (obshtestvo). In some cases, these two terms were used interchangeably by the participants; however, the Bulgarian LGBTQI+ organizations have been consistently using the term "gey obshtnost" (literal translation of gay community), and this is the Bulgarian term used in the questionnaire and by most of the participants.

Community versus individualism

First, I asked the respondents how they imagined a gay community. This question usually triggered initial detachments from the term in a process of definition by rejection and self-distancing. There are two main reasons for this

detachment. First, almost half of the respondents understood the term as *"absorbing"* their individuality.

> I do not understand why we have to divide ourselves in this way; we are personalities, free people, and all these divisions are some stereotypes... I have no community; I am myself and need to be accepted as such, not as a part of some invented community. Emil (34)

Despite the common use of "obshtnost" in Bulgaria, in 13 accounts, the respondents reflected on the English term "gay community" and associated it with the term *"communism."* The "communitarian" in "gay community" was discussed with a strong detachment from the communist past in Bulgaria.

> All these societies (used interchangeably) remind me of communism, and I do not like this idea. We have fought so hard to be free and to show our capacities as individuals, and I honestly do not understand why some people want to go back. What are they trying to achieve with this? Milen (47)

The notions of individualism have decreased the importance of gay community in the last few decades (Holt, 2011); however, in the Bulgarian context, individualism has been significantly strengthened by the post-communist rhetoric of *individual capability*, *personal achievements*, and *personal freedom*. Moreover, individualism as an opposition to communism used to be the main rhetoric and strategy of the Bulgarian LGBTQI+ movement until 2010 (Darakchi, 2021).

The second reason for the initial rejection of the term "gay community" is the *gay culture detachment*. Understood as a "gay scene" (Robinson, 2008) for 18 people, similarly to the conclusions of Holt (2011), the term "gay community" means gay clubs, saunas, and other sexual and social gay venues.

> By "gay community," I understand all those fashion icons and sex clubs. What else? disco clubs... and many other places I usually do not attend because I have normal friends and I go to normal clubs... If I want sex, there is Grindr and other apps. Svilen (39)

Similarly to what Woolwine (2000) has described, the initial rejection of gay community does not mean that these respondents do not belong to a community. In almost every account, the respondents in this study use the terms "our people," "our folks," and "we," which refer to all non-heterosexual males.

> I do not know... You know that our people are strange ... Nikola (23)

> We, the homosexuals. Metodi (38)

> We do not know how to fight; we will never have the Western way of gay life. Mihail (29)

The use of the word "we" in the conversation demonstrates a notion of togetherness and belonging to a bigger network of people who share similar characteristics or/and interests, although the idea of a gay community is

initially rejected verbally (Forest, 1995; Robinson, 2008). After the respondents had already expressed their initial associations with the term "gay community," I asked them to describe their networks of non-heterosexual people, following Holt's (2011) suggestion for a broader definition of "gay community" in the questionnaires. Refocusing the question from the general definition to their notions of "gay community" brought different, less judgmental descriptions of a gay community where the respondents not only expressed their notions based on personal experiences but also suggested certain idealistic views of what a gay community should be.

Subjective notions of "gay community"

The largest number of respondents (29) described gay community as *a "community of friends"* defined by Woolwine (2000): a network of non-heterosexual friends who play a big role in their lives, including emotional support, comfort, understanding, and financial help. For many, this is the only community they feel part of and the only way of organizing that makes sense and exists.

> I have a good number of homosexual friends and a few very close friends. If you ask me about my community, this is my community. This is what I understand as a gay community: support, travel... well, at least this is my network (*sreda*). Yes, I think 'networks' is the definition I would use. 'Community' reminds me of other things.

Interviewer: What other things?

> It is like the cooperatives we had during communism. It is too much; I cannot feel so close to everyone to use such strong terms (laughing). Ivan (46)

The notion of "gay community" as friends is expressed mostly by people from G1 and G2 who have not been involved in LGBTQ+ community activities. These respondents represent different social and educational backgrounds; however, the common feature among them is a well-articulated anti-communist notion.

The second most often expressed notion (19 respondents) of "gay community" is the "imagined gay community" (Woolwine, 2000). "Imagined" communities are those formed by common values and interests despite geographical distances. For those respondents who discovered other non-heterosexual people online after 2007, the long-distance connection not only made it possible to initiate emotional and sexual relationships, but the access to the Internet also allowed them to join different groups of interest to them: gaming, movies, forums, fashion, drag culture, parties, group travels, and others. This is well articulated in the accounts of people living outside of Sofia and many from the G3 who maintain their networks online.

> In my hometown, although it is big, we have no events. It is all very boring. I remember being very happy when I found all the organizations and some groups, and I did not feel alone anymore. I now participate in many discussions online, and I have made friends with some guys I do not even know in person. Mihail (26).

The younger the respondents, the greater the importance of the "imagined gay communities." In many cases, common interests are considered a more important factor for belonging than sexual orientation.

> Here, it is a small place, and I know a few guys, but I do not have a lot in common with them. They are a bit feminine. We do not hang out. My gay networks (sredi) are online mostly, says Svetlin (34).

The smallest number of respondents (14) described their communities as "organizations" (Woolwine, 2000). This is a well-articulated notion of "gay community". It is described in the accounts of those who have been involved with LGBTQI+ organizations in some way or participate in forums or groups associated with a specific organization. To define this type of notion, Woolwine (2000) has formulated a distinction between "personal pragmatism," typical for those who want to improve their abilities and skills, and "tactical pragmatism," typical for those who distance themselves from campaigns of politics that do not fit their personal views. The data from this study suggest that "personal pragmatism" is not expressed significantly in the respondents' accounts. This can be explained by the activities of the LGBTQI+ movement, which has had a mostly mobilizing role during the last three decades rather than being a community space offering a vast variety of training and skill development.

In summary, the discrepancy between verbal self-detachment and factual belonging demonstrated above can be figuratively named the *gay-community-belonging contradiction*. It is a negotiating, self-positioning identity work (Stein, 1999), which involves initial verbal detachment from "gay community" in general, followed by a description of a gay community that coincides with personal beliefs, values, and mode of involvement in it. It is tempting to consider the *gay community belonging contradiction* as an Eastern European phenomenon given that in a post-communist context, "invisibility" is often used as a strategic mechanism to maintain a non-heterosexual network privately (Stella, 2015); however, the scholarship often does not consider "ordinary gay lives" (Brown, 2012), and this contradiction might also exist in an Anglo-American context.

Community attachment and community involvement

Community attachment theories have suggested that non-heterosexual people participate *sexually*, *socially*, and *politically* in gay communities (Kippax et al., 1993). The data from the study suggest that there are a very small number of

men (3) who are married to a woman or are in a heterosexual relationship and practice sex with men without any community attachment. Most of the respondents have described their sexual involvement within a broader network of non-heterosexual males. Some of the respondents' main criteria for attachment or detachment to a gay community are the notions of "gay culture" and "the gay scene". Those criteria for analysis of the social organization of non-heterosexual males have been used in other studies exploring alternative gay community structures (Wilkinson et al., 2012). There are three patterns of attachment to gay community based on these criteria.

Sexual attachment and the adoption of the political

The first pattern is summarized from the stories of those respondents who do not engage exclusively with gay culture; however, they do not detach themselves from the scene and gay culture, and they attend venues and events searching mainly for sexual and social contacts. Attendance at gay venues was the only form of engagement for those who had a sex life before the wider access to the Internet. After 2008–2010, many of the respondents joined some sort of dating website and/or app. What is typical of the transition to online spaces is the inevitable encounter with social and political messages and interactions. For Vasil, born in 1972, the public baths, parks, and toilets offered anonymity and sexual encounters that only involved limited sociability. Later in 2012, when he joined online forums, he came across people with different backgrounds, and those interactions, according to his words, "opened an unknown world for him." Vasil's story is similar to others who encountered messages for political action, social activities, and activism online and adopted certain political community reflections.

As mentioned earlier, the online forums devoted only to sexual meetings at this stage remain a very small part of the "gay online spaces" in Bulgaria. Over the years, the popularity of public baths, parks, or toilets has decreased significantly in favor of "online gay places."

> I don't go to the Varna beaches anymore. I have lost connections there. Last year, we went to Barcelona for the pride. This year we will go to Mallorca; my friends will take me to the gay places, and there are such amazing men.

Interviewer: Has this changed anything in the way you think about activism and organizations?

> Well, I am too old to join these organizations, but it looks like it is important to organize people. You can see they test for HIV there, and they collect money for different causes . . . It is not as pointless as I used to think, but it is Spain; I doubt we can achieve the same here. Dani (67)

Furthermore, for some respondents in this study, attending Gay Pride events and other community events in Sofia is a chance to meet sexual and romantic partners.

> I have an account on Grindr, but it is different... It is anonymous. If you go to some meetings, like a gay movie screening, you can meet some interesting people there, and communication is easy. I met my last boyfriend at such a meeting, says Krasi (26)

After 2010, the increasing roles of forums and dating online spaces, combined with possibilities for travel and mobility, and the increasing role of LGBTQ+ organizations, redefined the role of "gay venues." Gay bars, Pride events, gay parties, and saunas in different European countries have become trendy for many males of different ages in this study. These mostly public "gay venues," however, are increasingly experienced within a political context as they are organized by NGOs, host different charities, public figures, and campaigns, and convey political messages. Although people who attend such venues and events do not automatically adopt political community thinking, they are more likely to do so compared to those who do not attend such venues.

Gay culture detached social involvement

While social interactions and gatherings with other non-heterosexual males used to be very limited for those who led a sex life during the communist regime, nowadays most of the respondents maintain a network of friends and colleagues. Another pattern of social and sexual engagement is shared by those who avoid contact with people involved in gay communities, or "the scene." The internet has strongly mediated the establishment of those small-size "personal communities" (Holt, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2012). These are people who describe their involvement as "normal." These are mainly respondents from G1 and G2. They usually do not attend gay venues and usually hold a critical view of the latter as "slutty" and "unfriendly."

> I have been at ID a few times... A year ago, I went to that one close to the Palace of Justice (Club 121), but I was brought by friends. It is not my place; everyone is being watched as a piece of meat... OMG, you know what? They also have a place where they can fuck! This is too much for me. Alex (34)

These respondents describe their involvement as regular friendship networks for gatherings and social, emotional, and financial support that takes place outside of gay culture circles. While these networks are very similar to what has been described in other studies as "personal communities" (Holt, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2012), there are four very important differences between them.

First, the "personal communities" are described as networks including family members; however, in this study, the families are rarely part of such

a network since most of these respondents have not come out to their families. In other post-communist contexts, remaining invisible is in fact a strategy to maintain social contacts in a hostile environment (Stella, 2015). Very often, this involves strategic outness (Orne, 2011) to some members of their families (usually the mother) and some of their "most trusted" heterosexual friends (usually females) and disapproval of those "visible" members of the LGBTQI communities that "threaten" their "normality." These respondents are more likely to call for "normality" and identify themselves as "normal." However, this is not the "commonplace" and the normality in the study of Browne and Bakshi (2016) where becoming commonplace or "ordinary" does not mean falling into normative practices and ways of thinking. In this case, "the normal" is exactly the opposite—a call for heteronormative lifestyles—and these respondents are more likely to engage with anti-gender rhetoric regarding visibility, political correctness, sex positivity, monogamy, and civic activism.

Second, the concept of "families of choice" (Berger & Mallon, 1993; Dewaele et al., 2011), which is used to describe alternative-family relations among non-heterosexual people in other studies, is not relevant in the Bulgarian context, where the participants' families of origin remain central in their lives.

> I call some of my friends "family" sometimes... but I do not think that this is the real family I have. This is a sacred word, and it does not work like this. We use it sometimes as a joke. Ivan (42)

Similarly to results reported for Poland (Mizielińska, 2022) and Hungary (Béres-Deák, 2019), these respondents manage to stay close to both their "chosen family" of friends and their families of origin without having to choose only one of these. The close family ties can be explained by the economic hardships of the transition to democracy (Mizielińska, 2022) and cultural models of family relationships.

Third, the "personal communities" include lovers (Holt, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2012), while the respondents sharing this pattern of involvement generally tend to derecognize the idea of "friends with benefits." On the contrary, romantic love in a monogamous relationship remains a central value in their romantic lives. Mizielińska (2022) has explained that in the Polish context, this is a "buffer against social homophobia." However, another possible explanation is the heteronormative structure in a context without state institutionalization of non-heterosexual relationships. Most of these respondents express certain nostalgia that is not located in any specific period and search for long-term online relationships, which, according to them, are "almost impossible" because of "the slutty gay culture."

> I know some people can be friends and can fuck with many friends, but I cannot. I think it is another way to say you are a slut. I cannot be friends with my exes, ha ... I tried, but

it did not work. You know, when feelings are involved... I was hurt so much; I cannot be friends with him, although he wanted it, and he still wants it. Niki (29)

Fourth, those who express this pattern of involvement trust female heterosexual friends and other males from their non-heterosexual personal communities the most when it comes to emotional and social support; however, they rely mostly on their families when it comes to financial support, which is yet another difference with the results of Wilkinson et al. (2012), where half of the respondents rely for financial support on their families. This can be explained by the fact that almost all the respondents who share this pattern are not out to their families. Finally, those who represent this pattern are less likely to have lesbian, transgender, or queer friends in their environments. Most of them do not approve of the umbrella term "LGBTQI community" either; they often describe it as contradicting the "masculinity" of non-heterosexual males and "counterproductive" for gay rights, mainly because it includes trans and non-binary people.

Gay-culture-embracing communities

In contrast to the personal communities disassociating from gay culture and the gay scene, another pattern in the social structure and organization in these circles is to embrace gay culture and the gay scene. Although they have different visions about the meaning and politics of "the gay community," these respondents participate in or have participated in community events with certain political meanings, such as Gay Pride events, community clubs, online community forums and groups, and training, as well as gay *sexual* venues such as gay bars, saunas, parks, and toilets. Social, sexual, and political attachments are combined in this pattern. Usually, most of these respondents were motivated by romantic or sexual desires when they joined the communities; however, the networks they encountered there introduced them to social and political networks.

> When I came to Sofia, I knew two guys I had met online. I had already had sex with one of them when I visited Sofia. This is how I entered into some circles of gay people. Then I realized what gay activism is. These guys taught me a lot.

Interviewer: Do you think this has changed your ideas and attitudes toward organizations and gay culture?

> Definitely, yes ... I remember ... well, I remember how I used to say that all these activists suck and are useless, that everyone is a slut. You know, we hate things we do not know. It's like living in different worlds, so it is about who you are going to meet first, I guess (Niki 39)

This is, however, not one single, united, and homogeneous community. Similarly to the different notions of "gay community," the main division in

the politics of the gay community and LGBTQI organizations, as well as in the perceived image of gay culture, depends on the person's political views. Those who share rather liberal views tend to be moderate regarding "friends with benefits" by only acknowledging other people's rights to be in an open relationship. This is typical for G1 and G2. On the opposite side, those who are part of leftist gay culture circles or organizations have expressed great support for "sex positivity," open relationships, and practices that would be considered "pervert" (Seidman, 2004) by some people sticking to their "personal gay-culture-detached communities." Gay-culture -embracing communities are more likely to engage politically in their communities.

> A friend of mine invited me to that group . . . (group name) on Facebook. They had very funny memes, and then I learned a lot of things, although sometimes it is too much when they fight over some terms and things I do not understand.

Interviewer: What would you say was the most important thing you learned there?

> I think the history of Stonewall . . . I had no idea that all of this activism started so long ago. Then I saw a review of the movie . . . The name is . . . something about gay parades . . . It is taking place in Britain, and the minors also participate . . . This was so nice to see how other people can support us, Boris (35)

The recent anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria (Darakchi, 2019) have also strengthened the political attachment within the gay culture-embracing communities. During the interviews, 4 respondents explained that they were motivated by the anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric of these movements to participate more actively in the Gay Pride events and the community networks. This is well articulated in the account of Stefan.

> . . . when exactly it happened, I do not remember, but I was reading some comments on Facebook in some group about book reviews. Then there was a book about the dangers of LGBT people, and then when I saw the comments, I was horrified. Soon after that, I watched a lady on TV who was saying that we are a threat to her children . . . I am a threat to her children . . . How? Then I decided that I have to do something; I cannot avoid this topic anymore . . . So I went to Pride in Sofia for the first time in my life, and I met some amazing people there. I was with a friend. Stefan (31)

While many studies claim that the gay community is losing its relevance (Holt, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2012), the recent anti-gender campaigns have not been reconsidered as a mobilizing factor in the development of a gay community and its relevance. Furthermore, those respondents who embrace gay culture and the scene within their non-heterosexual network are far more likely to have lesbians, transgender, and non-binary people in their environment and to express their support for the umbrella term LGBTQI+.

Discussion

The social forces mediating the emergence and development of a gay community in Bulgaria differ from those in North American and Western European countries. Bulgaria never had its "gay ghetto", nor did it have an HIV/AIDS crisis, and the transition from gay venues to online dating happened rapidly compared to other countries' gay communities. The emergence of community networks was intensified by the mass access to the Internet and later social media, the membership of Bulgaria in the European Union, and the activities of LGBTQI+ organizations (Darakchi, 2021). One of the main challenges of community organizing and community politics in the Bulgarian context was and remains *individualization*, which was further strengthened by anti-communist notions after the fall of the communist regime. Regardless of the developments in different networks and community circles, the lack of institutionalization (Stella, 2015) and symbolic erasure by the state and the anti-gender campaigns remain the biggest challenges and have the potential to mobilize political attachment among some respondents and to strengthen more "exclusionary" and "normalizing" rhetoric.

The data suggest that identification with a gay community differs in terms of *self-declaration* versus *factual belonging*. The exploration of the different meanings and notions of "gay community" suggests that the "belonging contradiction" can explain the discrepancy between the initial verbal rejection of the term "gay community" and the factual belonging to community networks. These results require a reconsideration of the conclusions depicting "a decreasing significance" (Holt, 2011) of gay communities, especially in quantitative studies. It is crucially important to take into account that the verbal statement in a questionnaire might not represent the idealized notions of gay community and the respondents' actual involvement and belonging. Therefore, closed-scale questionnaires pose a risk of oversimplification and overlooking the ambivalence toward gay community (Holt, 2011) for different audiences.

Furthermore, involvement and participation in gay communities are significantly defined by notions of gay culture and gay organizations. Those who detach themselves from gay culture and LGBTQI+ activism form "personal communities" (Wilkinson et al., 2012), which, however, differ from their counterparts in other cultural and political contexts, mainly by the exclusion of family members. Therefore, it is unclear whether "personal communities" in the Bulgarian context are an alternative to "gay communities," some forms of fraternities without a community political attachment (Schluter, 2019), or whether these networks represent a long-existing structure that has never been associated with gay culture in general.

Social background and income have played a significant role in the development of gay communities in Bulgaria, especially in the first two post-communist decades (1990–2010), when belonging to gay venues, networks, and

organizations was only accessible for those who lived in the capital, had higher education, spoke English, and had enough income to attend gay venues. After 2010, the expansion of social media and the political diversification of the movement made it possible for people from different social backgrounds to participate in community activities. The data from this study suggest that in many cases, middle-class professionals are less likely to be open about their personal lives and sexuality to their colleagues and to participate in community activities (prides, meetings) compared to those working as waiters and hair-dressers, for example. Some studies have claimed that involvement in gay community is typical for middle-class men, using certain cultural codes in a certain "gay ghetto" (Barrett & Pollack, 2005). This conclusion is not applic-able in the Bulgarian context due to the lack of a "gay ghetto," the increasing internal and external mobility, and the wide access to online community activities. Furthermore, there is a stronger attachment to gay communities among those who migrate to the capital Sofia based on the need for social, emotional, and financial support compared to those who were born there.

The term "gay community" needs reconsideration to take into account the diverse identifications and representations of non-heterosexual males. A large part of the respondents in this study do not recognize the terms "gay" and "gay culture." On the other hand, some respondents identify as queer. It is a relevant question based on these data whether the term "gay community" includes these diverse identifications and the possibility of derecognition of the term "gay." The term "LGBTQI+" seems to be used in many scholarly texts and activism as a substitute; however, as the data demonstrate, those who derecognize "gay culture" are less likely to identify with this term either. Another alternative to "gay community" would be "non-heterosexual male communities" a term that would not only represent diverse identifications in different cultural and geo-graphical contexts (Brown, 2012) but may also bring greater freedom for identification and belonging, being less culturally codified, for the respondents in the studies exploring "gay communities," especially those who initially reject the term. Although some studies have claimed that gay communities are becoming less relevant for non-heterosexual males in favor of "personal com-munities" (Holt, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2012), the data from this study suggests an opposite process. There is an increasing mobilization and attachment to non-heterosexual communities, which varies depending on the recognition or dere-cognition of gay culture. Moreover, certain forms of sexual involvement in different venues often lead to political involvement due to the internationaliza-tion and politicization of gay sex venues.

Finally, the organized political attack against LGBTQI+ people by nationa-listic and religious agents has encouraged some of those who formerly avoided gay culture networks and venues to join organizations and communities within a political activist context. Therefore, the gay community's pessimism might be exaggerated, at least in the Bulgarian context. As anti-gender campaigns and

right-wing populism are gaining significant power on an international level, we need more studies that explore the attachment and belonging of non-heterosexual communities within the rising anti-LGBTQI mobilization. Future research needs to pay attention to (1) the transition between social and sexual involvement to political involvement and vice versa; (2) the adoption of political through sexual involvement; and (3) to what extent belonging to certain types of gay communities reflects on the psychological and physical wellbeing of non-heterosexual people (Morris et al., 2015).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

ORCID

Shaban Darakchi 🔗 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4611-6186

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethics approval

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Antwerp issued on 16.03.2020/Reference number: SHW_20_09.

References

Adam, B. D. (1985). Sexual cultures and the sociology of gay men. *Social Problems*, *32*(2), 143–153.

Adam, B. D. (2001). Globalization and the mobilization of gay and lesbian communities. In D. della Porta & S. Tarrow (Eds.), *Globalization and social movements* (pp. 166–179). Palgrave Macmillan.

Altman, D. (1996). Rupture or continuity? The internationalization of gay identities. *Social Text*, *48*(48), 77–94. https://doi.org/10.2307/466787

Altman, D. (2001). *Global sex*. University of Chicago Press.

Barrett, D. C., & Pollack, L. M. (2005). Whose gay community? Social class, sexual self-expression, and gay community involvement. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *46*(3), 437–456. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2005.00021.x

Beck, D., & Purcell, R. (2020). Community organizing. In R. Purcell & J. V. Caballero (Eds.), *Community development for social change* (pp. 89–93). Routledge.

Béres-Deák, R. (2019). *Queer families in Hungary: Same-sex couples, families of origin, and kinship*. Springer Nature.

Berger, R. M., & Mallon, D. (1993). Social support networks of gay men. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, *20*(1), 155–169. https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2062

Brown, G. (2012). Homonormativity: A metropolitan concept that denigrates "ordinary" gay lives. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *59*(7), 1065–1072. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2012.699851

Browne, K., & Bakshi, L. (2016). *Ordinary in Brighton?: LGBT, activisms and the city*. Routledge.

Carless, D., & Douglas, K. (2017). Narrative research. *The Journal of Positive Psychology: Dedicated to Furthering Research and Promoting Good Practice.* *12*(3), 307–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262611

Cohler, B. J., & Hammack, P. L. (2006). *Making a gay identity: Life story and the construction of a coherent self*. American Psychological Association.

Coleman-Fountain, E. (2014). *Understanding narrative identity through lesbian and gay youth*. Springer.

Connell, R. W. (1992). A very straight gay: Masculinity, homosexual experience, and the dynamics of gender. *American Sociological Review*, *57*(6), 735–751. https://doi.org/10.2307/2096120

Darakchi, S. (2019). "The western feminists want to make us gay": Nationalism, heteronormativity, and violence against women in Bulgaria in times of "anti-gender campaigns". *Sexuality & Culture*, *23*(4), 1208–1229. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09611-9

Darakchi, S. (2021). Bulgarian LGBTQI movement: Generations, identifications, and tendencies. *Sexualities*, *25*(7), 909–925. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607211000201

Dewaele, A., Cox, N., Van den Berghe, W., & Vincke, J. (2011). Families of choice? Exploring the supportive networks of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *41*(2), 312–331. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2010.00715.x

Dhoest, A. (2022). Generations and shifting sexual identifications among flemish non-straight men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *70*(10), 2011–2034. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2048164

Escoffier, J. (2018). *American homo: Community and perversity*. Verso Books.

Forest, B. (1995). West Hollywood as symbol: The significance of place in the construction of a gay identity. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *13*(2), 133–157. https://doi.org/10.1068/d130133

Gamson, J., & Moone, D. (2004). The sociology of sexualities: Queer and beyond. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *30*(1), 47–64. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110522

Ghaziani, A. (2011). Post-gay collective identity construction. *Social Problems*, *58*(1), 99–125. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2011.58.1.99

Gruev, M. (2006). Komunizm and homoseksualizam v Balgaria (1944–1989) [Communism and homosexuality in Bulgaria (1944–1989)]. *Anamnesis*, *1*(1), 23–41.

Harvey, K. (2000). Gay community, gay identity and the translated text. *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, *13*(1), 137–165. https://doi.org/10.7202/037397ar

Heaphy, B. (2008). The sociology of lesbian and gay reflexivity or reflexive sociology? *Sociological Research Online*, *13*(1), 188–199. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1675

Heywood, A. (2017). *Political ideologies: An introduction*. Macmillan International Higher Education.

Holt, M. (2011). Gay men and ambivalence about 'gay community': From gay community attachment to personal communities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *13*(8), 857–871. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2011.581390

Kippax, S., Connell, R. W., Dowsett, G. W., & Crawford, J. (1993). Sustaining safe sex. *Aids*, *7*(2), 257–264. https://doi.org/10.1097/00002030-199302000-00015

Kuhar, R., Kuhar, R., & Švab, A. (2013). The interplay between hatred and political correctness: The privatisation of homosexuality in Slovenia. *Southeastern Europe*, *37*(1), 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-03701002

Levine, M. P. (1979). Gay ghetto. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *4*(4), 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v04n04_04

Marková, I. (1997). The individual and the community: A post-communist perspective. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *7*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1298(199702)7:1<3:AID-CASP396>3.0.CO;2-L

Martel, F. (2018). *Global gay: How gay culture is changing the world*. MIT Press.

Mizielińska, J. (2022). *Queer kinship on the edge? Families of choice in Poland*. Taylor & Francis.

Mizielińska, J., & Stasińska, A. (2018). Beyond the Western gaze: Families of choice in Poland. *Sexualities*, *21*(7), 983–1001. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717718508

Morris, S., McLaren, S., McLachlan, A. J., & Jenkins, M. (2015). Sense of belonging to specific communities and depressive symptoms among Australian gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *62*(6), 804–820. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.999491

Murray, S. O. (1992). Components of gay community in San Francisco. In G. Herdt (Ed.), *Gay culture in America: Essays from the field* (pp. 107–146). Beacon Press.

Orne, J. (2011). 'You will always have to "out" yourself': Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness. *Sexualities*, *14*(6), 681–703. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711420462

Paternotte, D. (2016). The NGOization of LGBT activism: ILGA-Europe and the treaty of Amsterdam. *Social Movement Studies*, *15*(4), 388–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2015.1077111

Peacock, B., Eyre, S. L., Quinn, S. C., & Kegeles, S. (2001). Delineating differences: Sub-communities in the San Francisco gay community. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *3*(2), 183–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/136910501750153003

Plummer, K. (2002). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. Routledge.

Robinson, P. (2008). *The changing world of gay men*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Schluter, D. (2019). *Gay life in the former USSR: Fraternity without community*. Routledge.

Seidman, S. (2004). *Beyond the closet: The transformation of gay and lesbian life*. Psychology Press.

Stein, A. (1999). Becoming lesbian: Identity work and the performance of sexuality. In S. Craig (Ed.), *The Columbia reader on lesbians & gay men in media, society, and politics* (pp. 81–92). Columbia University Press.

Stein, A., & Plummer, K. (1994). 'I can't even think straight': 'Queer' theory and the missing sexual revolution in sociology. *Sociological Theory*, *12*(2), 178–187. https://doi.org/10.2307/201863

Stella, F. (2015). *Lesbian lives in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia: Post/socialism and gendered sexualities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Szulc, L. (2018). *Transnational homosexuals in communist Poland: Cross-border flows in gay and lesbian magazines*. Springer International Publishing.

Weeks, J., Heaphy, B., & Donovan, C. (2001). Families of choice: The changing context of non-heterosexual relationships. In J. Weeks, B. Heaphy, & C. Donovan (Eds.), *Same sex intimacies: Families of choice and other life experiments* (pp. 9–27). Routledge.

Wilkinson, J., Bittman, M., Holt, M., Rawstorne, P., Kippax, S., & Worth, H. (2012). Solidarity beyond sexuality: The personal communities of gay men. *Sociology*, *46*(6), 1161–1177. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511435064

Woolwine, D. (2000). Community in gay male experience and moral discourse. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *38*(4), 5–37. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v38n04_02