



“Coming Out To Yourself”: Reflections On Early-Years Sexual Identity Formation Among Different Generations of Bulgarian Non-Heterosexual Males

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Abstract

During the past few years the so-called “anti-gender campaigns” in Bulgaria have revitalized the polemics surrounding the development of non-heterosexual identities claiming that these identities are “imported” by “Western” politics and discourses in order to “weaken” and transform national cultural and political models. Analyzing 63 semi-structured in-depth interviews with non-heterosexual males from different generations, this study aims to contribute to the theories of non-heterosexual identity development by providing data from Bulgarian context. The data from this study suggests that: (1) non-heterosexual male identities in Bulgaria have existed before the “global gay culture”; (2) the younger the participants the earlier they realize their non-heterosexual desires often within the “pre-sexuality stage” defined by the stage models and the youngest cohort self-label their same-sex attraction mainly through an “identity-centred” sequence, before engaging in sexual activities; (3) the greater awareness of role models, the wider access to information, and the involvement in the LGBTIQ+ communities have contributed to a more positive and self-respectful identity development; (4) physical contacts and observations as significant sources for the questioning of a non-heterosexual identity have been replaced by virtual observations and communication; (5) the Internet and social media have made non-heterosexual identity development more accessible regardless of social and economic background, and that (6) non-heterosexual identity development does not lead automatically to a culturally defined gay identity.

Keywords Sexuality · Non-Heterosexual · Gay Identity · Anti-Gender Campaigns · Homonormativity · Eastern Europe

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Introduction

The debates on the “nature” of homosexuality have been significantly revitalized during the backlash known as “anti-gender campaigns” in recent years. The proponents of the anti-gender movements claim that homosexuality “can be learned and taught” and the so-called “gender ideology” is an “instrument” for teaching homosexuality to youngsters (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). Therefore, all educational activities that mention anything remotely connected to gender or sexuality have been one of the main targets of the anti-gender movements. These processes have taken place in many Eastern European countries, Brazil, Colombia and others (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

These campaigns have been extremely successful in Bulgaria. In a series of campaigns on social media maintained by certain religious and nationalistic organizations and parties, any educational policies which mention “gender” or LGBT have been attacked and the people involved in these policies have been publicly humiliated and threatened. Furthermore, in these discourses homosexuality is viewed as something “imported, not existing before 1989 and portrayed as an instrument for invasion of poorer countries by the “West” by making them “less populated” (Darakchi, 2019).

The qualitative studies investigating the “lived” and often hidden experiences of non-heterosexual individuals remain a small portion of the studies devoted to sexuality and sexual identity. These recent events and the polemics surrounding the “nature” of homosexuality as “imported” in Bulgaria require a detailed investigation of sexual identity formation in the former communist countries. To date, there is no single qualitative study investigating the formation of non-heterosexual identities in Bulgaria. Thus the local stories and lived experiences are missing in these discussions; instead, the development of non-heterosexual identity is told predominantly by the populist far-right movements and public figures.

This study aims to provide insight into the formation of non-heterosexual male identities in Bulgaria by using an intergenerational perspective and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Responding to the need for qualitative data investigating the awareness of one’s sexual orientation, this paper focuses on the early years experiences of the participants and seeks to answer three main questions. First, how has non-heterosexual orientation awareness happened in the Bulgarian context during different historic periods? Second, which are the main self-identified milestones in the development of a non-heterosexual identity? Third, which are the sources of information that have influenced the formation of non-heterosexual identity over time?

Theoretical Approaches

The first models to investigate the development of sexual identity were the so-called “stage models”. The stage models define specific, “universal” stages which constitute the development of sexual identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Many studies have found discrepancies between individual experiences and the “stage models” (Olive, 2012). Furthermore, the “stage models” suggest that the individuals will finally “come out” to their environment. However, the Internet nowadays allows for anonymous coming out and coming out to geographically distant people or networks (Giano, 2019) and besides some individuals might never “come out”. Criticizing “the stage

models" as limited, D'Augelli (1994) proposed the model of sexual development as a "life span" process that considers setbacks and nonconsecutive stages within the individual experiences. Similarly, Lipkin (2001:103) proposed a "mega-model" that combines the previous most cited stage models and argues for flexibility when it comes to the consecutive stages. Lipkin's model consists of 5 stages:

- (1) Pre-Sexuality: Preadolescent nonsexual feelings of difference and marginality;
- (2) Identity Questioning: Ambiguous, repressed, sexualized same-gender feelings and/or activities. Avoidance of stigmatized labels;
- (3) Coming Out: Toleration then acceptance of identity through contact with gay/lesbian individuals and culture. Exploration of sexual possibilities and first erotic relationships. Careful, selective self-disclosure outside the gay/lesbian community.
- (4) Pride: Integration of sexuality into self. Capacity for love relationships. Wider self-disclosure *and* better stigma management.
- (5) Post-Sexuality: A diminishment of the centrality of homosexuality in self-concept and social relations.

Lipkin (2001) noted that this mega-model is a "gross generalization" and does not represent all the experiences; however, it can be used as a framework when investigating the development of non-heterosexual identity. This article focuses on the first 3 "stages" of the model, emphasizing the milestones which influence one to *come out to oneself* rather than to come out to "the others".

The "stage models" have emphasized the structures which contribute to one's self-awareness of sexual desires and sexual identity. The structures in a certain society or a certain historical period however can only present a limited picture of different realities and different experiences and fail to provide sufficient information on collective experiences typical for a specific cohort (Cohler & Hammack, 2006). One possible solution to overcome this limitation is to "reclaim the gay past" (Duberman, 1988), using the individuals' voices (Dowsett, 1996; Seidman 2004). This allows for a better reconstruction of the socio-economic conditions which have played roles in the development of a non-heterosexual identity among the studied group and, in particular, historic periods and specific political and economic conditions (Parker, 1989). At the same time, it also allows registering the differences and changes in the reconsideration, self-management and labelling of the "sexual" (Coleman-Fountain, 2014).

Overcoming the dualism between structural and constructivist approaches, combining the "objective" and the "subjective", the material and the cultural (Husu, 2013) is specifically useful in the Bulgarian context where the knowledge and the archives from the communist past before 1989 remain very limited. Moreover, the communist period is usually associated with the "lack" of same-sex practices and relationships in many public narratives. Contrary to this "belief," Chauncey (2008) demonstrated that behind the myths of the nonexistence of gay cultures and practices there was a proliferating gay world hidden from the public.

Early Years' non-heterosexual Identity Formation

Different sociohistorical circumstances define different possibilities for people with same-sex attraction and life stories hold the power to offer different “representations of identity” (Cohler & Hammack, 2006). A very important period in this process is the years before adolescence (up to 10) and the years of adolescence when the young individual discovers and reflects on their desires and allocates them to the available categories in a specific cultural context (Driver, 2008). In many societies across the globe, the existing categories are usually heteronormative and the structures do not allow any forms of non-heterosexual being (Coleman-Fountain, 2014). In a heteronormative society, children interact and grow up within the so-called “heterosexual market” (McConnell-Ginet & Eckert, 2003). This is a social organization of language, rituals, festivities, clothes, colors and other categories which allocate specific roles to boys and girls preparing them to become couples. This “market” is especially visible in all the school activities. As a result of this, some adopt a strategy of outperforming their peers academically and in sports to compensate for their inability to fit into the “market” (Lipkin, 2001; Fuentes, 2020). The resources available to young people and society’s role models are crucially important in this period (Dube, 2000; Driver, 2008).

Sexual Encounters, Gender Performativity and non-heterosexual Identity Formation

The first sexual encounter is a major milestone in the development of non-heterosexual identity. Some recent studies reported that the lack of proper educational and cultural settings leads to negative experiences, unpreparedness and a lack of proper language among LGBTQI+ individuals during their first sexual encounters (Gillespie et al., 2021). Furthermore, in a heteronormative non-heterosexual environment any sexual practice or preference which does not conform to the idea of “normality” may be considered ‘bad’ and may be subject to criticism, “normalization” or rejection. Usually the notion of the “good” citizen frames the sexual with the romantic, the relationship, the marriage and children, and the monogamy – all typical for the heteronormative structures (Seidman, 2004).

The first sexual encounter is for many non-heterosexual males a milestone when they reconsider and rediscover their physical and emotional preferences (Dube, 2000). This involves one’s understanding of masculinity and performance (Connell, 1991; Shio & Moyer, 2021), where common strategies are dating females (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994) and strait-acting performances to different audiences (Eguchi, 2009; Edwards, 2012). The first sexual encounters among non-heterosexual males are experienced more traumatically than those among non-heterosexual females due to the patriarchal norms (Hegna & Larsen, 2007). This is especially valid in patriarchal societies where the receptive role is viewed as feminine and the penetrative role as masculine (Parker, 1989; Bereket & Adam, 2006). Furthermore, gay pornography has been portraying features of male dominance and a certain image of the “male” which is often incorporated as a “standard” among non-heterosexual males.

These stereotypes however are not stable. The heteronormative structures and scripts have been tackled by different audiovisual agencies and social activism bringing up on camera diverse male bodies and behaviors (Rothmann, 2013). Moreover, some individuals identify as non-heterosexual before any sexual encounters (Dube, 2000) as a result of greater social awareness and access to information. This study focuses not only on the first same-sex encounters but also seeks to understand the self-reflection of those who compare their first sexual encounters with females to those with males as a process of sexual identity development.

"Discovering" non-heterosexual Identity

Globalization and technologies have led to significant shifts in the social construction of non-heterosexual identities. Education and awareness of alternative lifestyles have contributed to greater freedom and individual choices, which have resulted in major conflicts between local normative structures and mythologies on one side and new technologies and ideologies on the other (Altman, 1996; Parker, 1989). The rapid transformation and globalization in the past few decades have brought a series of reconsiderations which require an investigation of sexual identity development among non-heterosexual people as a life-long process (Floyd & Stein, 2002).

Sexual identity is "discovered" through discourse and conversations, reading and self-reflection on one's sexual desires and experiences. The development of non-heterosexual identity in this regard is an interaction and interplay between different sources of information such as books, movies, newspapers, and internet sources. The interpretations and reflections on this information (Cohler & Hammack, 2006) constitute *sexual objectification, self-objectification and subjectification* (Dowsett, 2015).

According to Martel (2018) "*satellite TV, mobile screens, internet, and social networks*" have immensely transformed the lives of LGBT people across the globe. The internet has created many possibilities for the development of non-heterosexual identity and many studies suggest that online interactions, storytelling and acquaintances have predefined the development of non-heterosexual identity providing anonymity and wider access to information and support (Giano, 2019). Gay dating websites and applications have further widened the possibility to connect and communicate anonymously without being a part of a community and without coming out "officially" (Mowlabocus, 2016). Many studies have focused on exploring the structures and messages of the available content, such as movies (Seidman, 2004), music, arts, internet pages and other sources, to discover what might have influenced the development of non-heterosexual identities. What I am interested in is the availability of these resources in Bulgaria as well as the participant's reflections, objectification and subjectification of this information and sources.

Method

This study uses a qualitative research methodology. In-depth interviews (semi-structured questionnaire) 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 following sampling procedures in previous studies (Harry, 1986; Merriam, 2002). All the participants chose the place for the interview: 43 people chose different public settings (restaurants; bars, parks); 13 people were interviewed online due to Covid-19 measures, and 8 interviews took place in my home. The interviews lasted from 1 h to 34 min to 4 h and 47 min. The participants’ 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 additional 13 people. Based on the recommendations given by the last group I made contacts with additional 22 people. I contacted the remaining 20 participants directly on Facebook after some observation of the comment sections on two Bulgarian LGBTQI+ Facebook groups taking into account diverse opinions and demographic statuses.

The respondents represent diverse groups in terms of age, place of living, ethnicity and education. Regarding age: 18–25 years old – 8 participants; 25–30 years old – 9; 30–40 years old – 18; 40–50 years old – 17; 50–65–7; above 65 years old – 4. 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, HIV/AIDS crisis and others, would be rather irrelevant in the Bulgarian context due to the isolation of Bulgaria from the “Western world” before 1989 during communism. For the purposes of 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 impossibility for open self-expression. Age remains the biggest challenge to the sampling of participants since people above 65 years old would not readily agree to participate. It poses a certain risk for overestimations and misrepresentations in the analysis.

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 out 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 which contested the liberation of sexual freedom.

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

Regarding the place of living, I selected an almost equal number of people from each age cohort living in small towns, regional cities and the capital – Sofia. Regarding ethnic identity, 51 people self-identified as ethnic Bulgarians, 5 as ethnic Turks, 2 as ethnic Armenians, 2 as ethnic Jews and 5 as ethnic Roma. Sexual orientation identifications vary as follows: 28 have used the term “gay”, 31 have used terms such as *homosexual*, *MSM*, and “*simply male*” (most of them distancing themselves from the term “gay”), and 4 respondents have identified as queer.

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. Some 49 people reported a higher educational degree (at least a bachelor’s – 4 years degree), 8 high education and 4 with primary education. 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.

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 participants’ well-being. Using thematic analyses, I outlined the main patterns and milestones discussed by the respondents. I used discourse analysis to identify the relations between the patterns and investigate the dynamics in these patterns over time.

The main limitation of this study is related to accessibility and representation. Although I searched for participants 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 which 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

“Becoming” non-heterosexual: Feeling “the difference”

Very often in public discussions in Bulgaria, the non-heterosexual identity is considered as a sudden “becoming” due to media or other types of external influence. The data suggested that most of the participants felt “different” from a very early age according to their descriptions. This feeling of “being different” was experienced in

different ways and was usually reported as first experienced between 7 and 12 years old. Nearly two-thirds of the participants shared that they used to be very shy children who did not have many friends and often played alone.

"I had no idea what was wrong with me but I knew there was something, you feel it, it has to be felt, it is like in a horror movie, you expect that something bad is approaching" - Asen (31).

The "difference" was often connected to playing with "female" toys, wearing female clothes and imitating female singers.

"I have a clear memory with my dad when I wanted dolls but he insisted on buying me dinosaurs and bought me a dinosaur. When we got home I put some lipstick on the dinosaur, and some dresses" - Dani (37).

Another major "difference" was felt by body comparisons.

I must have been very feminine because I was always ridiculed for my gestures, I was also a bit fat, and they also named me after a female name. I did not like the male games, it was always aggressive for me, I remember I could not throw like them, my voice, I can say now, was not so masculine, I could not lift heavy stuff like them, I did not belong there". - Alex (36).

A significant milestone in self-understanding as "different" took place when the participants entered primary school. The school was usually described as aggressive and hostile towards the differences. Some 41 people reported abuse in their school years based on their looks and/or behavior. Mihail is 24 years old, born in a small town and he still "has chills" when he thinks about the time in school. He was constantly abused verbally and physically, called different female names and threatened. He preferred to stay home and read books most of the time. He never reported that to teachers or parents because his father was also controlling of his behavior and mannerisms. Mihail's situation was common for many people in this study.

Another very common feature of school life was the experience with sports. Once they were bullied in a school environment, the "difference" felt by the participants was taken to the football pitch. While there were other games such as volleyball where the participants felt uncomfortable, the football game appeared to be one of the most hostile situations in schools. Some 51 participants reflected on the football game as a very competitive, rude and unfriendly environment. These sentiments were also reported by many who would not consider themselves physically different. The football game appeared to be a situation where the physical abilities to play properly were judged and sanctioned. In many cases, the name-calling and verbal abuse from the classroom continued and multiplied on the football pitch. Very often participants would say that they "hated" football. There were two types of reflections on the football game regarding labelling.

First, those who perceived themselves as more "feminine" were automatically claimed to be bad players and very often "kicked out" of the game or blamed in case of a game loss. Second, those who did not perceive themselves as physically different from the other boys usually avoided football games due to fears that they would fail to prove their masculinity on the pitch by not being able to play properly.

The feeling of being different however has changed over time. While G1 and G2 tended to describe their experiences as not being able to fit into the "heterosexual market" the youngest participants, especially those born in big cities, described their

early experiences with disapproval and willingness to change their school environment by taking a stand against self-objectification as "victims". This change was brought about by two important factors: (1) the participation in LGBTQI+ networks and (2) the role models from pop culture.

"I wonder why the older men very often describe themselves as victims; I do not feel like a victim, I fight, I use my sexuality as an advantage rather than a disadvantage". - Steven (23).

First Encounters: Naked Bodies, Emotions and Fantasies

One of the most frequently reported situations of the participants' childhood experiences was their first physical encounters. By first physical encounters, this study understands all the situations where the participants observed another naked or partially naked male body. There were several kinds of situations reported that can be categorized as (1) reflections on older males' bodies; (2) reflections on peers' naked bodies and (3) reflections on the "screen bodies" – movies, comics, cartoons, toys etc. Regardless of having different experiences with different male bodies almost all of the participants in this study reflected on their memories of the first naked male bodies they had seen.

Reflections on Mature Males' Bodies

Some participants report that observing neighbors provoked in them sudden physical urges and desires. Some 11 people reported this kind of physical sensation while observing male bodies from their close environment between 6 and 14 years old.

"I must have been 7 or 8 when I watched the neighbor who was mowing the lawn and he was half-naked with a very beautiful body. I felt something very strange, then I remember I had wet dreams. I was thinking about his body very often and I did not know why, but I learnt to masturbate a bit later. Of course, I knew I could not tell anyone about this, because the other boys always discussed females and not males. - Kris (25).

Similarly, Stan (35) would often dream about the man who was working in their family store. Later on, at 9 years old, he would dream about his ski teacher. He wanted *"to be close to him, to touch him, to feel him"*. Krasi (38) would often kiss his older cousin on the lips, he would hug him, and according to Krasi,

"They all thought I was a kid, but I knew very well I feel warmth in my body when I did that".

Another most frequently reported situation where the participants remembered their interest in the male body was bathing. In some cases, especially for G1 and G2 the very first occasions of bathing with close relatives or going to a public bath that they remembered provoked "strange" physical sensations in them. Ivan (28) was 8 years old when he felt a certain type of physical desire. He used to go to public baths with his grandparents. Ivan reported remembering that when he was in the men's pool with his grandfather, he would carefully observe male bodies, shapes and sensations. He also remembered his interest in the penis, however, he shared that he knew he should not be watching the other males' penises – he already knew that that was a

“faggot thing to do” which demonstrates early years of awareness of stigma (Fuentes, 2020) and lack of any alternative models (Cohler & Hammack, 2006; Dube, 2012).

Reflections on Peers' Naked Bodies

The most frequently reported interest towards the male body involved the respondent's peers. Very often the reflections on their first memory related to a male body were connected to the games in schools bathrooms or hidden settings on the children's playgrounds where males “measured their penises” or “measured the length of their pees”. This appears to be a very common thing done in the childhood of almost half of the participants. The reflections on these events included realizations of desire involving self-sanctions and self-stigmatization within the “heterosexual market (McConnell-Ginet & Eckert, 2003). Angel (24) remembered being a bit ashamed of having the smallest penis among all the boys. Therefore, he would avoid participation in such masculinity reaffirming (Edwards, 2012) “competitions”, but he started fantasizing about certain boys and their physique.

A very interesting ritual reported by 23 people is group masturbation. Through group masturbation, the participants understood different occasions when they would get together and masturbate. In some cases, it happened when the idea of masturbation was discovered and therefore transferred to peers. Most of the cases however were connected to a very specific phenomenon related to porn sources. Different groups of young males would gather in a place where someone would bring porn magazines which were difficult to access before the Internet, especially in smaller towns. Another occasion that would bring young boys together was whenever someone in their group would have at home one of the first video players or one of the first cable channels in town, where they would watch porn together. Those were videotapes “well-hidden” by their parents or TV1000, which played porn after 1 AM.

The group masturbation appears to be one of the first very clear self-reflection of desire towards the male body. In many accounts, there was a desire to touch other penises or to have something more intimate with specific people from the group. That phenomenon was most often reported as occurring between 1995 and 2008 (G2) and those gatherings were typical for smaller towns where the children could easily get together at someone's house. That phenomenon occurred before the mass Internet access and the socioeconomic conditions (Sediman, 2004) of the time appeared to be a prerequisite for those group gatherings. Those group gatherings were rarely reported to have occurred after 2008; however, many of the younger participants shared that they had heard about such gatherings in the past.

Reflections on the “screen bodies”

The wider access to the Internet allowed G2 and G3 to have access to pornography at a very young age. While G1 had access to the Internet at age of 16 on average and their computer at age of 24, G2 had access to the internet at age of 8 on average and their personal computer at age of 11. The wider access to cable channels and diverse movies also provided more opportunities to observe and compare male bodies. Some participants shared memories from a very early age. Marin (29) reflected on a mem-

ory of watching a movie with naked males taking a bath and then drawing them when he was 6 years old, which according to him puzzled his parents. Marian (22) reported remembering that at age of 7 he watched the cartoon Tarzan and he was very curious about the "muscular" body of the protagonist and he wanted to be "taken, hugged and kissed" by him. In general, the most common memories of the youngest cohort regarding first physical desires are related to gay porn. This brought an awareness of their desires and physical and emotional feelings as non-heterosexual at an earlier age compared to the generation before them.

In general, the younger the participants were, the earlier they directed their first desires towards the male body. The mega-model of Lipkin (2001) defines the period before adolescence as non-sexual; however, the data from this study demonstrates that certain physical desires had been felt at a younger age. Furthermore, while G1 and G2 had experienced difficulties finding the appropriate language for their feelings and desires, G3 had struggled less to allocate their physical curiosity and desires as "normal" and "pleasurable" rather than "abnormal" and "sinful" as expressed by the two other cohorts. This discrepancy between the stage models and the field data confirmed the findings of previous studies that the rapid development of technologies within the past two decades had reorganized and intensified earlier development of sexual identity (Dube, 2000; Olive, 2012; Cohler & Hammack, 2006). Another significant change is related to the stigmatizing labels (Lipkin, 2001) and avoidance of certain people, behavior or places. Most of the participants from G3 did not express such notions and the main reason is their coming out which provides freedom of expression and resistance to certain homonormative discourses (Coleman-Fountain, 2014).

"It is really stupid to avoid certain people because they are not masculine or cool, it shows your mental capacity and I think this was very typical for the older gays but they are not out which limits their whole life" - Ivo (24).

Acknowledging non-heterosexual Identity and Performativity

First Realization

Following the mega model of Lipkin (2001), the period after the preadolescent years is considered the time for questioning one's sexual identity. This is related to any source of information or life events that might offer a possibility for comparison of our desires and the desires of others in a socio-historical context (Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Cohler & Hammack, 2006; Dhoest, 2022). The data from this study shows that the sources of the questioning as well as the period when this process begins differ for each cohort. A very significant milestone in most of the participant's stories was the time when they first realized that they are attracted to their sex physically and/or emotionally attaching those desires to a "different" identity.

Very typical for G1 was the romantic attachment to another boy which would reframe the social expectations for a boy to be attracted to women. On average, the time of awareness was 14 years old. The respondents from G2 reported two different reasons for realizing their own non-heterosexual identity. On the one hand, some explored the bodies in porn movies and magazines. On the other hand, some formed

connections with other boys and men (mostly online) in their adolescence, which helped them realize and allocate their sexual desires in a category of “homosexual”; “gay” or “pederast” – depending on the context. The average age of awareness was 12 years. Finally, those from G3 reflected on their first awareness as an act within their environment. Those who entered adolescence after 2005 had wider access to movies, books, online forums etc., which made it possible for them not only to understand better their sexuality but also develop some identity as non-heterosexual before having any sexual encounters, which confirmed the results of other studies (Dube, 2000; Dube, 2000; Driver, 2008). The time of awareness also depends on a variety of factors however media and the Internet (Dube 2012; Martel 2018) have had a crucial role in this process. Those born in bigger cities or the capital reported an earlier year of awareness compared to those born in smaller towns. Furthermore, irrespective of the place of living, those who had a personal computer, cable channels, sex education books or supportive parents reported earlier awareness than those who grew up in homes without books, support and Internet.

Performing Masculinity

In Bulgaria (and not only) it is very common to ask kids from a very young age about their boyfriends or girlfriends. Often expressed as jokes, many participants reflect on these memories as “confusing” and “controlling”.

“It is still going on, it started...I do not remember...since I remember myself, everyone in my town would ask me on the street when I was going to get married and have children...it is so annoying”. - Ivo (36).

The memories of the first “girlfriends” among the participants dated back as far as 5 years old. In general, 19 people reported having a girlfriend when they were between 5 and 14 years old. Other 12 people reported having a girlfriend when they were between 14 and 21 years old. There are 3 different patterns of behavior and self-reflections connected to this phenomenon. For some who realized that they were attracted to men physically and emotionally when they were between 18 and 21, having a girlfriend was “the normal thing to do” reflecting on these events as inevitable. Usually, those were people who stayed detached from any non-heterosexual communities and networks (including online).

“I might have had some desires towards boys, but I did not have anyone like me around and I did not know that it was a sexual desire exactly. I never spoke and compared those feelings”. - Ivan (45).

For others, having a girlfriend was a strategy to avoid questions and suspicions from family and friends. In certain cases, for example in smaller Muslim towns or evangelical Roma communities, where sexual encounters before marriage were strictly forbidden, some participants used that as “an excuse” to abstain from sexual acts with their girlfriends.

“I was pretty aware that I liked boys but I did not want to be called gay on the streets so I decided I would have a girlfriend” - Meto (34).

Another group of people who rejected their emotions and desires towards men reflected on their relationship with girls as a way to “fix themselves”. This pattern was usually reported by people who grew up in smaller towns and religious communities.

"I was so scared I would be punished by God so I promised I would have three children and fix myself, I thought it was possible" - Ivelin (47).

Managing sexual identity means managing gender identity and expression (Seidman, 2004). Maintaining the expected gender roles by "having a girlfriend" was a way to "escape" (Connell, 1991; Shio & Moyer, 2021) from or deny non-heterosexual desires for many. Similarly, some individuals chose to be the penetrative (active) side in an encounter in order (according to their own words) to be "still manly" (Connell, 1992), to be "less feminine" (Edwards, 2012), to be "less sinful". It is a pattern of behavior typical for smaller, religious communities. These events are known as pitfalls (Floyd & Stein, 2002) or setbacks (Lipkin, 2001) in the development of non-heterosexual identity. What was common in the reflections on masculinity and sexual identity was the burden of maintaining a certain masculine image and behavior which reinforced homonormativity (Hegna & Larsen, 2007). On the other hand, having a girlfriend provided a chance for comparison between intimacies with males and intimacies with females which led to a reconsideration of sexual identities and desires later in some participants' lives.

Having a girlfriend was barely reported among those from G3. In a few cases, any sexual or intimate relationship with a girl was described as a "responsible" action in an attempt to learn more about their sexuality. Many of the youngest respondents in this study had come out and respectively they did not have to conform to certain expectations of masculinity. Very often those from G3 would criticize such relationships with girls as an "egoistic" and "selfish" act where another human being (the girlfriend) is *"deceived and constantly betrayed"*. The dynamic in the notions of masculinity, community expectations and relationships with girls was radically changed due to the influence of the so-called youth sexual subcultures (Driver, 2008). This changing notion is usually related to the involvement with online and physical LGBTIQI+ community events and activities, travelling abroad and popular culture.

First Sexual Encounters

A central milestone in the understanding of sexual identity is connected to the physical and emotional feelings during the first sexual encounters of the participants. Very often the stories of G1 regarding their first sexual encounter are related to different spaces such as the public baths where one would experience sexual relations for the first time. The democratic changes after 1989 brought a revival in the religious institutions of different religions and denominations. On the one hand, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church established its presence in all aspects of public life, on the other hand, certain evangelical denominations and Islamic denominations entered Bulgaria and instituted certain "detraditionalization" (Darakchi, 2018) in these communities.

While the participants from G1 would discuss their first sexual encounters within the context of prohibition and 'hiding', those from G2 often discussed their first sexual encounters within the context of the "sinfulness" of same-sex acts and the fear of HIV/AIDS. The discourses of "sin" and HIV/AIDS dominated the public conversations related to non-heterosexual people. It is not by coincidence that the biggest issues with mental health were reported for that period. The predominant HIV/AIDS

discourse set another pitfall (Gillespie et al., 2021) in the development of sexual identity as some participants considered “becoming normal again”.

“It was 2003 I was afraid I had caught HIV due to my first sexual act without a condom. I panicked and I started searching for information. It was all about AIDS in the newspapers. I did not have access to the Internet. I knew almost no one like me to share with... that harmed me a lot, I thought I was dying, I wanted to become normal again” - Alex (36).

Some of the participants (14) had their first sexual encounters with women. One of the most decisive points regarding sexual identity formation in those participants’ lives was their first sexual encounter with men. When telling the stories of their first sexual encounters, many participants compared their sexual experiences with women to those with men. This is a common account among those from G2 who had intimate experiences with women. When making those comparisons, the participants use a very similar set of emotional words. For some, intimacy with a man made them feel “alive” for the first time. For others, the first sexual contact with a man compared to the one with a woman gave them an answer to the question of why they felt different in the past. For some others, sexual contact with men felt “natural” for the first time. It is hard to summarize the words used in those accounts; however, the male body compared to the female body was described as “tempting,” “attractive,” “with the perfect smell,” “natural,” “real,” “unique” and others.

In conclusion, having first sexual acts with women was rarely reported among G3. The cultural and social liberation and access to resources allowed many to reflect on their sexual desires earlier in a process of subjectification (Dowsett, 2015) within an “alternative” and liberating language framework” (Gillespie et al., 2021). In these specific cases, very often that was an act of self-reflection, of seeking to understand more about their sexuality.

What was significantly different for the three generations in the development of sexual identity in the adolescent years was the changes in the available categories depicting sexual belonging, desires and preferences within a “body liberation” (Rothmann, 2013) framework. Identity categories such as sapiosexual, omnisexual, pansexual, queer and others usually did not exist in the vocabulary of G1 and G2 when they reflected on their experiences. The diversification of the identifications and the awareness of alternative “queer” identity categories have been reported in many studies among the youngest cohorts (Cohler & Hammack 2006; Gillespie et al., 2021; Dhoest, 2022) and this study confirms these findings. The LGBTQI+ activism in Bulgaria, as well as YouTube videos and Facebook groups, made an increasing number of terms available to young people even in their preadolescent years, which resulted in a better allocation of sexual desires in different categories and according to the participants that helped them to “find themselves”.

“YouTube, I got to know everything from YouTube, there are many vloggers who taught me at an early age and it helped me a lot not to wonder what was happening to me” - Milen (21).

Sources of Information

The respondents paid significant attention to the self-acceptance of their sexual identity or the "coming out to yourself" as defined by one of the participants. There were strong generational and socioeconomic differences in the self-acceptance of non-heterosexual desires and emotions. The "non-heterosexual" places appear to have played a big role in the individuals' understanding of sexuality and difference. Before 1989, the main places where the respondents got to know other non-heterosexual males were public baths. Located in the bigger cities and the capital, the public baths provided one of the first opportunities for the participants to interact with other individuals, share their experiences and reflect on their sexual desires. In Sofia, another opportunity used to be Culture (Kultura) cinema where some of the participants met other males and initiated intimate contact for the first time. "Toploto beach" near Varna happened to be the place where Dani (67) used to go every summer and meet not only Bulgarian gay friends but also many tourists from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

While some of the participants had the chance to travel abroad and to reflect on their desires in a foreign setting even before 1989, the years following the fall of communism provided for many more the chance to travel to different "Western countries," which appears to be one of the strongest influences on the developments of non-heterosexual identity for G1 and G2. These visits were very often connected with different conferences, training or tourism. After 2005 many people would go for the first time in their life to a gay bar in Sofia, engage with an LGBTQI+ organization or join online forums and dating apps (Darakchi, 2021). In the years after 2010, the interactions took place predominantly in online settings. Most of the bars in Sofia ceased to exist and those in Varna and Plovdiv closed their doors as well. The Internet and dating pages used to be the main places for interactions. In 2021 the STEPS, an LGBTQI+ community space, opened its doors and started playing a significant role as a safe space for exhibitions, concerts, training and community meetings. These dynamics of the community spaces also created different attitudes towards self-acceptance among the participants. While the gay scene in Sofia before 1989 provided opportunities for face-to-face meetings and reconsideration of sexual identity, the period after 2010 was connected to a certain "anonymization" (Mowlabocus, 2016) among some of the participants with limited opportunities for interactions, especially among those who search "only sexual encounters". This, however, should not be considered as a setback because some who live in smaller places or disengage from the scene or the mainstream non-heterosexual community have easier access to sexual encounters strategically revealing their identities which often resulted in friendships.

Self-acceptance strongly depends on the sources of information and interaction. These sources are connected to examples and cases where sex is not isolated as a physical desire but is celebrated as a feature of the individual (Seidman, 2004) and self. Before 1989, the occasional encounters with foreigners in Bulgaria and the travels to other countries provided opportunities for some to reflect on their sexual desires and experiences by watching movies and reading books. Some of the participants had a chance to travel to Budapest, Prague Warsaw or Berlin bringing back ideas of

sexual identity. The books that existed in some family libraries and played a role in self-acceptance before 1989 were “*Men and Women Intimately*” (1967) by Siegfried Schnabl and “*The Portrait of Dorian Gray*” by Oscar Wilde. The movies which provoked self-reflection used to be “*Brideshead Revisited*” (1967) first released in Bulgaria in 1985 and “*Death in Venice*” (1971) by Thomas Mann. The music icons of that period were Madame Dalida (1933–1987) and Lili Ivanova.

The years between 1995 and 2010 provided several opportunities for interactions and self-reflection. That period also marked wider access to the Internet, web pages and forums for non-heterosexual people. The book “*Men and Women Intimately*” (1967) continued to play a role in the self-understanding of the participants growing up in this period and it has been mentioned up to 2006. Very important sources for self-reflection became *Stalik blog* and the dating webpages and forums on *momcheto.com*, *elmaz.bg* and *planetromeo.com*. Notable movies and series which played role in the participants’ self-reflections in that period were *Will and Grace* (1998), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), and *Queer as Folk* (1999), which provided not only role models for many but the language and the categories describing identities and preferences. *Desperate Housewives* (2004), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Sex and the City* (1998) and many others became accessible for pirate downloading or were offered on cable channels. When it comes to music one of the most mentioned names which inspired many and became role models were these of Freddy Mercury, Madonna, George Michael and Elton John. Despite the increasing availability of sources of information and role models, self-acceptance during that period was negotiated between those new sources of information and interactions and the dominating discourse in the media, which usually connected non-heterosexuality with HIV/AIDS and depicted LGBTQI+ organizations as a threat to the birth rates and the national identity.

After 2010, the most influential movies and series which provided an opportunity to the participants who grew up during this period to question and self-objectify themselves were *The New Neighbors* (2007), *Physics or Chemistry* (2008) and *Glee* (2009), which became widely available on cable channels and even national TV channels. The expansion of Netflix and HBO go in recent years provided a variety of LGBTQI+ movies and series which have influenced the understanding of sexuality and non-heterosexuality. Notable names from this period are *Pride* (2014) *Sense8* (2015), *When We Rise* (2017), *Elite* (2018), *Euphoria* (2019), *Sex Education* (2019) and other politically engaged series and movies. The movie *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and the book on which it was based attracted significant attention. The pop icons of this period are Lady Gaga, Billy Eilis, Sam Smith and Olly Alexander.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of sources that have contributed to the understanding of non-heterosexual identity, these resources played a significant role in the reflections of the participants. In general, these resources predefined the understanding of “good” and “bad” sexuality and respectively sexual identity (Seidman, 2004). In general, the available sources of information for G1 and G2 mediated processes of sexual orientation and identity objectification and self-objectification (Dowsett, 2015) where the non-heterosexual desires have been gradually accommodated into identity and the self-stigmatization (Dube, 2000; Driver 2008) has significantly decreased. The first two generations are more likely to identify with a non-heterosexual identity (gay, homosexual, pederast (in a joking manner) which

promotes monogamy and good "citizenship" (Seidman, 2004) while many from G3 have subjectified their identities (Dowsett, 2015) and are more likely to reflect on the heteronormative and homonormative structures and consider their sexuality in terms of sex-positivity, where sex is celebrated and open relationships are viewed as an alternative to the monogamous couples.

Another significant trend is the understanding of non-heterosexuality as natural. Often citing the famous "Born This Way" by Lady Gaga, some from G3 have a very distinct approach towards their sexualities compared to G1 and G2. The sources of information after 2010 have provided a very positive image of non-heterosexuality which is often seen as "natural", "diverse" and "inclusive" of psychical and mental differences by G3. It is a process that Lipkin (2001) calls "engagement in a critique of conventional heterosexism". Of course, this does not mean that all the participants from G3 have these notions of their sexualities. On the contrary, there were a few people from G3 who would not have these notions and they were usually very detached from the LGBTQI+ community networks and online forums. Rephrasing Lipkin's (2001) words, these participants avoided having any "dimensions of meaning" to their sexual desires although they belonged to a community sexually, mostly online.

Regarding the sources of information, the data suggests that the wider the individual's participation in community networks and engagement with popular culture is, the earlier self-acceptance is observed. Those who stayed out of cultural events, online movies and book forums usually expressed negativism towards the popular culture and the models of behavior. These people tend to disassociate their physical desires from their public life, behaviors and interests. The greater the involvement in the LGBTQI+ culture and networks, the more inclusive approach towards sex as a positive, intimate and romantic experience is expressed.

The self-acceptance of the participants also depended on their families and the general attitudes towards difference and non-heterosexual issues. Despite certain generational differences, the data suggests that the higher educational status of the parents provided more opportunities for self-acceptance. In most cases, those opportunities were connected with providing appropriate literature and support. In some cases, that was done by providing books on similar topics. In other cases, it was done by providing appropriate occasions for conversations. Regarding gender differences, the mother was the parental figure who initiated the conversation and in many cases, the mother managed the father's fears and prejudices. In general, the younger the parents were the more reflexive approach they had. The generational aspect was significantly connected with the notion of non-heterosexual people who were already a part of the parents' personal and working networks.

The data from this study also suggests that self-acceptance is a continuous process with pitfalls and setbacks which confirms the life-long nature of sexual identity formation (D'Augelli 1994). It is a process of "continuous upgrading," as defined by Kris who is 54 years old, however, he has been considering notions and ideas of three generations and he is willing to engage with different discourses and ideas challenging his stereotypes and ideas of being non-heterosexual. Although marked as a stage in the stage models, the self-reflection and the self-acceptance is a long and in some cases reversible process. This is the case of Alex (39) and Kiril (38). Alex, who was

born in a small town, used to consider same-sex relations and sexual practices as sinful. Alex moved to the capital where he had the opportunity to interact with many other non-heterosexual people and to travel to many countries. His self-acceptance has been a process of learning and interacting; however, he still self-justifies certain desires and behavior in a continuous fight with his initial views of same-sex practices as “dirty, sinful, and forbidden”. Self-acceptance in this case can also shift in different settings.

“When I spend a month in my home town, I start feeling more sinful, it is all about religion and punishments there, but when I move back to my life in Sofia I feel more relieved seeing how normal it all is” - Georgi (39).

On the opposite side is Kiril who used to hang out with Alex during their student years and they used to share similar ideas and dreams. Kiril stayed in the smaller town and got a job. He does not have gay networks; in his own words, he is not happy with his non-heterosexuality, he is outside of any LGBTQI+ networks. His understanding of life and intimacy is very negative and blameful. He considers homosexuality as abnormal and deviant and *“does not see a point in it all”*.

Discussion

The stage models categorize preadolescence as a non-sexual period. However, the data from this study, building on similar research (Olive, 2012; Giano, 2019), has proven that this does not correspond to the individual experiences, especially during the past decade. Initializing these early signs of one’s non-heterosexual awareness is important for the scholarship on non-heterosexual identities and sexual development models. It would not only improve the research methodology and the reconsideration of the sexual development models but it can also provide evidence for more effective public policies and prevention programs.

The early years experiences were better understood, reflected and self-subjected at a younger age among those who grew up during the past decade compared to the previous generations due to the advancement of the Internet, video streaming platforms, mobility and LGBTQI+ community involvement. Those from G1 and G2 self-labeled their same-sex attraction mainly through a “sex-centred” sequence (Dube, 2000), after engaging in sexual activities while the majority of the respondents from G3 self-labeled their same-sex attraction mainly through an “identity-centred” sequence (Dube, 2000) before engaging in sexual activities. However, these results do not fully correspond to what is categorized as “global gay culture” (Martel, 2018) because almost half of the respondents mainly from G1 and G2 do not recognize the terms gay and gay identity as relevant to them. This poses a challenge for further research that “celebrates” the progressive advancement of “gay rights” and might overlook criticism of “gay” as a cultural identity, missing out on misrecognitions of widely used sexual identity categories.

The youngest generation in the study is less likely to have suffered from psychological discomfort, confusion and intimate life difficulties compared to the generations that grew up before them. The youngest generation has also shared a more positive image of themselves as being non-heterosexual. This confirms previous stud-

ies (Giano, 2019; Fuentes, 2020) dealing with the effect of early self-awareness and acceptance of non-heterosexual people. However, in the Bulgarian context, there is no single state school program for inclusion and support of non-heterosexual people and the attempt for such a discussion has been overshadowed and sabotaged by the anti-gender mobilization (Darakchi, 2019).

The first sexual encounters were reported to be one of the main milestones in the development of sexual identity during adolescence. This was even more explicit among those who had had previous sexual experiences with women, which allowed them to compare their physical and emotional feelings when engaging sexually with men and with women. While the age of the first sexual encounter has been dropping within the last 15 years, sexual encounters with females were less often reported and in certain cases, this was qualified by the youngest participants as a selfish act connected to injustice towards the women who were involved in this type of relationship. These results reconfirm the conclusions from other studies (Giano, 2019, Gillespie et al., 2021) and this requires more attention on the public policies for the prevention of STIs and ethical sexual conduct.

The formation of sexual identity is directly influenced by income, place of living and community involvement. While family income and the place of living played a bigger role in the participants' sexual awareness for G1 and G2, the rapid technological changes have allowed for literally everyone from G3 to have early access to information and materials, which not only have a positive effect on their self-stigmatization and wellbeing but also challenges the scholarship which defines LGBTIQI+ movement and culture as explicitly class defined structure (Barrett & Pollock, 2005).

The recent "anti-gender campaigns" in Bulgaria have motivated some of the participants from G3 to join politically engaged community networks and actions. Although this phenomenon is quite recent it has strengthened the earlier self-awareness of some further motivating political participation. These results are quite contrary to what Ghaziani (2011) describes as a "post-gay" era where youngsters prefer mixed networks to non-heterosexual communities. The same trend has been recently confirmed by Dhoest (2022) who explored generational differences in Flanders, Belgium. Ghaziani's (2011) study is carried out before 2011 when the "anti-gender campaigns" were not as organized and visible as today (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) however in the case of Dhoest (2022) this tendency is confirmed. This might mean that either the influence of the "anti-gender campaigns" is not as strong as in the Bulgarian context or the influence of these movements might not have been included in the research focus, especially in the latter study.

Finally, the results from this study can serve as a ground theory for "provincialization" of the sexual development models in a post-communist context with specific generational notions which differ significantly from those described in the "Western" scholarship. On the other hand, the data suggest that the awareness of one's non-heterosexual orientation and identity develops regardless of the political context and the "nature" of non-heterosexual desires and identities in Bulgaria was a "local process" long before the "global gay culture" (Martel, 2018) formed during the recent decades.

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