

Dual Minorities: Narratives of Russian-Speaking Youth of the Latvian LGBTQ+ Community

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Abstract. The aim of the research is to identify the main narratives about the identities of the Russian-speaking youth of the LGBTQ+ community, and whether these identities influence youngsters' sense of belonging to Latvia, where they comprise both a linguistic and a sexual minority group. The theoretical part of the current paper examines the theoretical aspects of national, ethnic, linguistic, sexual, and homosexual identities, as well as provides a deeper understanding about the young people as a research audience and the studies of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia. In the practical part of the work, three methods were used: semi-structured interview, thematic narrative analysis and content analysis. Based on the results obtained, conclusions were made about youngsters' identity conflict, the impact of youngsters' identities on their sense of belonging to Latvia, youngsters' experiences with stereotypes and discrimination in Latvia, and their participation in the Russian-speaking and LGBTQ+ communities. The results of the research enabled identification of 7 main narratives: the Russian-speaking community and a sense of belonging to Latvia; the Russian-speaking community and the influence of Russia; the LGBTQ+ community and hiding; the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexual privilege; the LGBTQ+ community and attitudes towards homosexual orientation; the LGBTQ+ community and hope for the future, as well as the dual minorities.

Keywords: content analysis, identity, LGBTQ+, narratives, queer theory, Russian-speaking, thematic narrative analysis, youth

Introduction

Both historical background and political situation have profoundly impacted the challenges faced by different minority groups in Latvia. This includes human right policies and safety, as well as the controversial attitudes that are widespread in the society. In 2022, the findings of the study of the association "Rainbow Europe" indicated that in the field of LGBTQ+ rights protection, out of 27 countries of the European Union, Latvia ranks 24th, and out of 44 European countries,

Latvia ranks 36th (ILGA-Europe 2022). According to the data of the Eurobarometer study, the attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community varies by age, “and young people have more positive attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people than older respondents. Recognition of legal partnerships can also influence a change in attitudes in a more positive direction” (Eiropas Savienības Pamattiesību aģentūra 2009). At the same time, a study conducted in 2021 proved that Russian-speaking young people supported the values of liberalism and were also more Euro-optimistic, however, “only 10% of respondents in the age group of 18 to 30 accept homosexuality” (Kugel, Lysenkov 2021). The aforementioned researches clearly indicate that both the situation with LGBTQ+ community and the identities of dual minorities need to be analysed to a greater extent, and there is a necessity for more extensive data in the field of queer studies in Latvia in order to understand what are the main issues that LGBTQ+ community faces in daily life. Thus, it can be concluded that the LGBTQ+ community in Latvia is currently experiencing changes, hence, it is important to learn about the personal experiences of the younger generations.

The main objective of the current research has been to identify the main narratives about the identities of Russian-speaking youth in LGBTQ+ community, and to find out whether they affect the sense of belonging to Latvia, while living in a country where youngsters belong both to linguistic and sexual minority. It is important to add, that the research on the history of the Latvian LGBTQ+ community has commenced very recently, the papers focus on the *perestroika* era (Lapsa *et al.* 2008–2009), the problem of homophobia (Mole 2011, 540–560) and “coming out of the closet” (Waitt 2005, 161–181), as well as activism (Vērđiņš, Ozoliņš 2013, 111–128), the normative legal framework of the USSR (Lipša 2016) and post-Soviet narratives (Ruduša, 2014). It must be highlighted that until now no research has been directly focussed on the identity of Russian-speaking young people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.

This research focused on four questions:

1. How does homosexual identity and the linguistic identity of Russian speakers conflict with each other? In what way is it possible to reduce this internal conflict?
2. How does the identity of young people relate to their sense of belonging to Latvia?
3. Are the identities of linguistic and sexual minorities a threat or a challenge to tradition and normality, according to young people? How do they experience it on a daily basis?
4. How do the homosexual and linguistic identities of young people affect their participation in the LGBTQ+ community and the Russian-speaking community?

The paper has considered the theoretical concepts of a queer theory (Spargo 1999), Richard Troiden's homosexual identity development model (Troiden 1988, 105–113), Thomas Eriksen's concept of 'ethnicity,' Richard Mole's research on the history of homophobia in Latvia (Mole 2011, 540–560), as well as the term 'dual minorities' (Sue 2013). For instance, 'queer' is a term used to describe all individuals who are not heterosexual or cisgender. According to homosexual identity development model, there are 6 stages of the development of homosexual identity: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979). It should be highlighted that in Troiden's model, "coming out of the closet" is a culmination moment and the "sign of maturity" in the process of identity formation: this the term is used to describe the process of an individual openly declaring their homosexual orientation, it should be noted that this is not just a single event, but a process that is never fully completed (Troiden 1988, 105–113). In the current paper, the results have been compared to the stages of this homosexual identity development model (1979) and the conclusions made about the identity development of Russian-speaking queer youngsters.

Methodology

The study is based on 15 interviews with Russian-speaking young people who identify as a part of LGBTQ+ community. Two sampling methods were used to create a representative sample: key informant (Latvian LGBTQ+ organizations *Skapis*, *Mozaika*, *Active Rainbow*, newspaper *Kvīri Runā*) and snowball sampling. It should be mentioned that the results of this study will apply only to this defined social group: Russian-speaking young people aged 18–25 belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.

In comparison with the Russian-speaking community, it should be noted that the representatives of the LGBTQ+ community usually question and even deny their identity, hide it and avoid conversations on this topic. When homosexual people reach the culmination of the identity development process and "come out of the closet", they may face other risks, such as conflicts in the family and the workplace. This stress and stigma can be reduced by the availability of information, involvement in activism, positive role models and an accepting environment (Greene 1994).

Notably, there are some similarities between the identities of Russian-speaking and homosexual people. For example, both groups have their own folklore, traditions, history and subculture. At the same time, both communities have faced a discourse of 'majority-minority relationships,' in which their minority group is placed against the majority group. In Latvia, both groups have faced stigmatization, prejudice and discrimination on a daily basis, and in the context of

ethno-nationalism, both groups can be considered a threat to “being Latvian” or *latviskums* (Mole 2011). Finally, for both groups, legitimizing discourse, political support and policies that ensure the protection of the rights of these groups are very important.



Figure 1. Similarities and differences between the identities of the Russian-speaking and LGBTQ+ community

Two research methods have been employed in data processing: thematic narrative analysis and qualitative content analysis, using a deductive approach: qualitative content analysis categories and a coding scheme were developed prior to the study. The content analysis enabled to establish common trends in the narratives of young people, and it also helped to identify the evaluation given by the young people to certain topics: identity, sense of belonging, culture, society. The thematic narrative analysis helped to organize the transcription of the interview in a way to emphasize the content of the narrative and to find common features in the narratives.

Results

As a result of the thematic analysis of the narratives, 7 main narratives were identified: the Russian-speaking community and a sense of belonging to Latvia; the Russian-speaking community and the influence of Russia; the LGBTQ+ community and hiding; the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexual privilege; the LGBTQ+ community and attitudes toward homosexual orientation; the LGBTQ+ community and a hope for the future; and the dual minorities. Each narrative includes several themes, and each topic includes several codes.



Figure 2. 7 main narratives of the Russian-speaking and LGBTQ+ communities

It should be noted that the narratives are interconnected, for example, the Latvian language is essential for both integration into Latvian society and integration into the LGBTQ+ community. The main reason is that LGBTQ+ community events, communication and activities of organizations are mainly organized in Latvian, hence, knowledge of Latvian language is necessary for active involvement in this community. The influence of Russia is also crucial for both communities: in Russian-speaking communities, the older generation is characterized by stereotypical thinking and prejudices about the representatives of various minorities. This is the reason why sexism, racism and homophobia

are often noticed in the conversations with youngsters' parents, which leads to physical and mental violence against the LGBTQ+ community, as well as to conflicts in the family, especially if the children adhere to more liberal views. The ideology and the new laws that ban materials about LGBTQ+ community have an external influence on Russian-speaking communities outside Russia, as well.

The results of the study revealed that dual minorities in Latvia face problems that are typical for both the Russian-speaking community and the LGBTQ+ community in Latvia: stereotypes and prejudices, discrimination, and lack of information. LGBTQ+ community in Latvia comes up against the problems related to the aspect of hiding, that is, the community lacks visibility; on the other hand, young people have too little information about LGBTQ+ terminology, events, and it is also difficult to find like-minded people, because LGBTQ+ organizations are only located in Riga, moreover, Riga residents are more open to diversity and Riga Pride is regularly organized in the capital city. At the regional level, especially in the Russian-speaking community, there is a greater risk of homophobia, which is based on stereotypes and results in discrimination – physical and mental violence, hate speech and crimes.

When it comes to safety, young people highlighted two factors: firstly, hiding their sexual identity, lying and 'selecting' their circle of friends, and secondly, hopes for a new generation to be more open-minded to diversity, better informed about the LGBTQ+ community and more educated, as well as new policies that would provide equal rights and safety for the LGBTQ+ community in Latvia. The majority of respondents admitted that they felt inner conflict, shame and fear when accepting their homosexual identity. When it comes to the factors that have helped young people reduce this cognitive dissonance, three aspects mentioned in the theoretical framework should be highlighted: access to information, accepting environment and positive role models. First of all, all young people looked for answers to their questions on the Internet, mostly in English. The information helped them learn more about sexuality, gender, puberty, relationships, LGBTQ+ terminology and to find pen pals. Secondly, an accepting environment in most cases helped young people feel safe and reveal their orientation to close friends. Young people admit that currently their circle of friends includes only those people who accept them and are more open to diversity in general. Thirdly, all young people actively consume cultural products about the LGBTQ+ community or created by queer artists.

As a result of the study, it was discovered that there are four other aspects important to dual minorities that were not identified with the help of the theoretical framework.

1. According to the data acquired in the spring of 2022, the Russian-speaking community is still dependent on the influence of Russia – this influence

is formed by such aspects as the stereotypical thinking of the older generations, the Russian information bubble and the situation of LGBTQ+ communities in Russia.

2. LGBTQ+ community has a hope for a better future, especially a hope for the younger generation, which could be more open-minded to diversity, including the LGBTQ+ community.
3. The sense of unity created by festivals and events, including the Latvian Song and Dance Festival and Riga Pride, is important to both communities. Interestingly, the majority of respondents have not attended any of these events, yet they actively consume information about these events on social media. Young people would gladly attend these events if they had a better command of the Latvian language and felt safe during the event.
4. Both communities believe that Riga is more open to diversity, and a large number of events dedicated to the communities take place in Riga. Therefore, it is also necessary to hold educational and informative events in the regions, including other cities and towns of Latvia, which would promote openness to diversity.

It can be concluded that this study provided an in-depth insight into the narratives of both communities, as well as helped to reveal the problems and manifestations of discrimination that Russian-speaking queers face in their everyday lives.

Discussion

It is important to discuss the limitations of the present study. For the further research it would be recommended to increase the sample, thus increasing the representation of the study. To obtain the most detailed results, it is recommended to study separately how sexual orientation affects the narratives and how the gender of young people affects their narratives. It is important to highlight the fact that the transgender identities and non-binary identities have not been analysed in the theoretical part of this study and not taken into account when analysing the narratives of young people.

When studying the topic of dual minorities, the researcher should also remember that the respondents may belong to more than two minorities, for example, to ethnic, religious minorities, as well as to social and economic risk groups. These aspects of intersectionalism are also important to consider when analysing the young people's responses.

The future studies could explore how the experiences of homosexual people differ in cities and regions of Latvia, as well as growing up in religious and conservative families. Also, if the civic partnerships become legally recognized in Latvia, it is useful to study how the respondents' lives have changed after it.

At the conclusion of the current study, the guidelines for conducting interviews with members of the LGBTQ+ community in Latvia were developed. There are three aspects that require particular attention:

- Confidentiality – the voices of the interviewees were changed in audio recordings, and the real names of the interviewees were replaced by the pseudonyms in the quotes;
- Safety – all participants were informed about their rights to cancel the participation in the interview and they had a possibility to choose the time and place of the interview. Some interviewees chose online interview format because they no longer lived with their family and felt safe at their own place. On the other hand, there were young people who wanted to meet in person because they did not feel safe talking about their sexual orientation while being at home. Therefore, the choice of the interview venue is essential for the respondent to feel safe;
- Trust – it is important that the researchers themselves have no prejudice against any of the minorities, as it may affect the course of the interview and also the results. It is essential for the researcher to talk about the research purpose, themselves, their views even before the interview, in order to mitigate the respondent's feelings of unsafety and vulnerability, and to provide support.

It is clear that there is a need of developing more extensive guidelines on conducting research about minority groups, because of vulnerability of respondents.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the narratives of Russian-speaking queer youth in Latvia. The findings indicated that the majority of young people experienced an internal conflict between their identities: all of them were raised in Russian-speaking families where the attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community were very controversial. Furthermore, the youngsters had rarely seen any representation of LGBTQ+ community in Latvia and because of that had struggled with the acceptance of their homosexual identity. It is important to highlight the influence of Russia on the negative attitudes towards queer community in the Russian-speaking communities abroad. However, the availability of information online and in English, positive role models in queer movies and TV series and an accepting environment such as close friends have helped to reduce this cognitive dissonance.

Comparing the results of the study with the homosexual identity development model, it can be concluded that the identity of young people is characterized by the stage 4 – **identity acceptance**, and in most cases, the respondents feel

belonging to the LGBTQ+ community and privately identify themselves with the community. However, only a few are lucky enough to reach stage 6, or **identity synthesis** – this is because the majority of respondents still hide their homosexual identity.

The other important insight is that Russian-speaking queers, despite their dual minority status, feel a sense of belonging to Latvia: they identify themselves with this country, they are motivated to learn the Latvian language and protect the Russian language and their memories about their unique culture, and they also actively attend local events and celebrate Latvian national holidays. All the participants noted that they had an essential sense of unity that they experienced at the festivals and events such as Latvian Song and Dance Festival, as well as Riga Pride.

According to Richard Mole, Russian-speaking and sexual minorities are considered “a threat to Latvian nation” (*latviskums*), and young people do experience discrimination in their everyday life, which manifests itself as mental and physical violence, as well as hate speech. Consequently, young people support the idea of a new policies that would protect them from hate speech motivated by homophobia and transphobia. Another proposal for solving this problem is the introduction of sexuality education in schools to normalize the relations of same-sex couples and promote openness to the diversity in Latvian society. It should be emphasized that the legal recognition of the civic partnership was mentioned by all 15 respondents.

The data of this study proved that dual minorities in Latvia feel comfortable, but not safe. The topic of dual minorities in Latvia is worth researching despite the complexity of the topic. This is substantiated by the fact that the amount of available information still remains quite scarce. This research topic combines important questions concerning human rights, safety and identity in the modern world.

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