



ERASMUS MUNDUS INTERNATIONAL MASTER  
**ADULT EDUCATION  
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

# Joyful Resistance: Youth Voices in LGBTI+ Activism

Student ID Number: 2778537S

Word Count: 19824

This extended study is presented in part fulfilment of the requirements of the International  
Master of Adult Education for Social Change

2024

---

# Acknowledgements

First of all I want to thank my supervisors: Dr Censu Caruana from the University of Malta and Dr Ruth Pearce from the University of Glasgow. Thank you for your mentoring me and helping me every time I got stuck. I am very grateful for the parts of your expertise you shared with me in this process.

Thank you to Francesca Zammit for holding my hand into the world of YPB and introducing me to different activist spaces in Malta. I am so happy I got to share and discuss my findings with you and the people who attended the workshop. I hope we meet again soon and I wish you loads of success in your art and in your work!

Thank you to LGBTI+ Gozo for welcoming my project with open arms. Thanks to your contributions I have gained valuable insights into the history of queerness and queer activism in Gozo, and I am very grateful for the time we have shared.

Thank you to Gabi Calleja and Clayton Mercieca for sharing their experiences of human rights advocacy in LGBTQIA+ issues, and to MGRM for sharing their experience of NGO work.

Thank you Crush Velvet for being an absolute rockstar and introducing me to the Maltese drag scene, your energy is priceless and I hope to see you on stage soon!

Thank you to all my participants for sharing their experiences as volunteers, youth workers, artists. I am very thankful for the time you took for me and for this project.

Thank you to Soha Naveen and Olivia Sino for your guidance as IMAESC alumni and friends. Thank you for continuously checking on me and offering help any time I have needed it, I am lucky we could count on each other during this semester in Malta.

Thank you to Michelle Arraut, Yurany Monsalve and Aleksandra Skowron for the friendship, love, mutual accountability and continuous support as we embarked together on this journey of writing our dissertations in Malta. I wish our past selves from September 2022 could look at us now and see how much we've grown and learned and loved and cried together.

Merci Hoël pour l'amour et la reconnaissance de mon identité queer, t'es la seule personne qui ne m'ait jamais effacée bien qu'on ressemble à un couple hétéro conventionnel. Merci pour ton soutien, ton écoute, ta tendresse toujours. Merci Elina pour nos discussions et ta Joie Militante qui m'a bien aidée à commencer ce projet. Merci aux Cadudion pour le love et pour m'avoir laissée finir d'écrire ce truc sur votre canapé pendant tout l'été, je vous aime fort!

# Abstract

*“Queer joy stands as a defiant celebration against ever limiting social norms and ongoing oppression. At the root, it makes more space for everyone. We lean into each other's stories, and lift each other up. By being witnessed as we are, we reclaim our collective space in a world that seeks to marginalize us over and over again.”*  
(Kaplan, 2024)

This dissertation examines the role of joy, hope and positive emotions in youth LGBTQIA+ activism. Historically, joy has been a key element of LGBTI+ activism, serving as a form of resistance, self-affirmation, and inclusive representation in the public sphere. In contrast to the historical violence and discrimination faced by the queer community, today's queer representation often embraces vibrant, celebratory imagery. While much research on LGBTQIA+ issues focuses on discrimination and hardship, this study argues that the celebratory aspects of queer activism significantly enhance its educational objectives when conducted in an intersectional scope.

This exploratory case study applies a phenomenological approach to the data collected through interviews and observation of youth queer activists, educators and performers in different contexts across Malta and France. The findings were analysed with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

The purpose of this research is to interrogate how joy, hope, and positive emotions are integrated into the educational processes of LGBTQIA+ activism. Its findings reveal that:

1. The participants use storytelling, mental health counselling, sexual health prevention and community-building tools to educate themselves and others on LGBTQIA+ issues.
2. Each of these tools is infused with joy or hope throughout the process, which proves that queer joy is political and useful to the purposes of LGBTQIA+ activism.

# Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Table of contents.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Opening.....	5
Background.....	5
Problem statement.....	6
Research questions.....	7
Relevance of this study to the field.....	7
<b>Theoretical framework.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Critical systems theory (Watson & Watson).....	10
Intersectionality (Crenshaw, Collins) and queer intersectionality (Gray & Cooke, Bilge). 10	
Queer feminist theory.....	13
Postmodern and contemporary feminism.....	13
Queer phenomenology.....	14
A bottom-up approach to collective liberation (Collins, 2019) and the theory of collective learning (Kilgore, 1999).....	15
<b>Critical review of literature.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>21</b>
Outline of this chapter.....	21
The choice of qualitative research.....	22
Case study with a phenomenological approach.....	23
Phenomenological approach: the use of IPA.....	27
Sampling.....	28
Data collection.....	29
Data analysis : IPA and thematic analysis.....	30
Limitations due to choice of research method.....	30
<b>Results.....</b>	<b>32</b>
Presentation of participants.....	32
Structure of this chapter.....	39
Can joy and hope be instruments for an intersectional approach in queer activism ?....	40
What tools & approaches do youth activists, youth workers, educators and performers use for community building in this joyful revolution ?.....	47
Building a community of resistance around joy.....	47
Storytelling and artistic workshops.....	49
Performing arts and entertainment.....	51

Sexual health prevention.....	52
Mental health counselling.....	53
Protesting.....	54
Normalising queer issues.....	54
<b>Discussion of results.....</b>	<b>56</b>
Queer joy is political, here is the evidence.....	56
Collective learning, bottom-up approach and convergence of struggles in the social movements studied.....	60
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>61</b>
Limitations of the study.....	61
Findings summary.....	62
<b>References.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>69</b>
List of Acronyms.....	69
Interview scheme.....	70

# Introduction

## Opening

LGBTQIA+ activism has played a significant role in challenging societal norms, advocating for equal rights, and promoting social change. Joy has been a recurring pattern throughout the history of queer activism, as a form of resistance, self-affirmation and in an inclusive dynamic of representation in the public sphere. While queer joy is a recent field of study, Dr Jessica Wright argues that the LGBTQIA+ community has a long-standing history of cultivating joy across generations: “There’s so much we can learn from queer elders about how queer joy has not only helped them to survive but to thrive. We need to understand queer and trans communities for the ways that they are living their lives in beautiful ways, connecting with communities and are happy and joyful in addition to struggling with difficult systemic issues.” (MacEwan University, 2023). The recuperation of the term “queer” by the LGBTQIA+ community can be perceived in itself as a form of joyful resistance, as it was reclaimed in the 1980s by the LGBTQIA+ community in a deliberately provocative and proud intention (Worthen, 2023).

Joy and hope as phenomena appear to be majorly understudied in sociology (Cieslik, 2015). By focusing on inequities in society, social studies participate in creating social change but researchers tend to forget that negative experiences constitute only a portion, rather than the entirety, of social phenomena (Veenhoven, 2018). While the struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights often involves addressing discrimination, violence, and marginalisation, this study argues for a recognition of the transformative power of joy and hope within LGBTQIA+ activism.

## Background

The LGBTQIA+ acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and all other identities encompassed in the queer community (LGBTQIA+ Resource Center, 2023). Throughout this study I will use “LGBTQIA+” and “queer” interchangeably<sup>1</sup>, “queer” being an umbrella term used to describe gender/sexual/romantic orientations or identities that fall outside of societal norms (LGBTQIA+ Resource Center, 2023). In this regard, “queerness” is understood as the quality of having or showing a sexual identity or

---

<sup>1</sup> In common discourse, “queer” has a connotation of fluidity and non-conformity often associated with left-wing politics, whereas variations of the “LGBTQIA+” acronym tend to be used for mainstream equality and advocacy projects, connoting more centrist politics.

gender identity that is different from traditional ideas about sex and gender (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2024).

From the 2000s until now, the Western world has seen a progressive destigmatisation of queerness in popular culture and judicial systems in different countries. As of May 2023, fourteen States of the European Union allowed same-sex marriage (European Parliament Research Service, 2023) and Greece joined that list in February 2024 (Drosopoulos, 2024). This same time period saw a growing prominence of LGBTQIA+ representation in popular culture, from pop music to online contents. In the 2022-2023 season, Netflix USA included 183 LGBTQIA+ characters in their TV series (Statista, 2023). U.S. print book sales of LGBTQ fiction reached nearly 5 million units in 2021 (Publisher's Weekly, 2022). This vast popularity, sometimes co-opted for profit by companies practising pinkwashing or performative activism during Pride Month (Psycha, 2020), came after decades of activism sparked in the Stonewall Riots of June 1969 by trans activists and drag performers, namely Sylvia Rivera (Duberman, 1993) and Stormé Delaverie.

In today's cultural and social landscape in the Western world, queer representation flaunts glittery outfits and sparkly colours, which creates a strong contrast to the history of violence and discrimination that paved its fight for equity. LGBTQIA+ activists, performers and street queens have historically reacted with laughter and joy in the face of violence: Duberman (1993, p.200) evokes a "chorus-line of mocking queens" chanting at the police in Stonewall, Turesky & Jae-an Crisman (2023) studied the expression of queer joy as resistance to a heteronormative space in the early Pride marches of Los Angeles. I argue that the celebratory dimension of queer activism contributes to the educational purposes of queer activism in different spheres.

## Problem statement

Research on LGBTQIA+ issues in social studies often tackles topics of discrimination, violence and bullying of queer people in different areas of society. In the past 20 years, research on LGBTQIA+ issues has covered themes of harassment and violence towards the LGBT community in Europe and the UK (Bayradkar & King, 2023), anti-LGBT legislation (Laviertes & Ramos, 2022), mental health issues and suicide in the transgender community (Barboza et al. 2016), post-traumatic stress disorder in the queer community (Roberts et al. 2010), homophobia in male socialisation (Pascoe, 2013), and more.

While it is important that researchers expose the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in order to instigate social change initiatives, this focus creates a joy deficit in social studies on queerness, as pointed out by Shuster and Westbrook (2022) in their study on transgender joy. I believe joy, hope and positive emotions can be vectors for social change, just as much as research has proved that exposing the trauma of the LGBTQIA+ community contributes to educating the world on queer issues. What place do joy and positive emotions occupy in the collective learning processes pursued by LGBTQIA+ activism ?

For this project, I collected testimonies from queer youth activists, youth educators, performers and artists across France and Malta. I also attended social events held by several LGBTQIA+ organisations in Malta and different Pride celebrations in France in Spring and Summer 2024.

When it comes to the data collection and analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews and used IPA (interpretative phenomenology analysis). I offered the option of creating a photovoice or a diary as an alternative for participants who would not like to be interviewed, but all the participants opted for the interview.

## Research questions

My main research question explained in the research statement is: What place do joy and positive emotions occupy in the educational processes pursued by Gen Z LGBTQIA+ activism ?

Sub-questions:

- Can joy and hope be instruments for an intersectional approach in queer activism ?
- What tools & approaches do youth activists, youth workers, educators and performers use for community building in this joyful revolution ?

## Relevance of this study to the field

The impacts of research on this topic can lead to the development of evidence-based strategies for fostering joy, hope, and positive emotions in LGBTQIA+ youth activism and education. Joyful experiences strengthen social bonds, support networks, and solidarity



within the LGBTQIA+ community. Therefore this research could inform the design of interventions and community initiatives that promote resilience, well-being, and sustained engagement in social change.

At a different level, this research could examine how joy, hope, and positive emotions act as protective factors against burnout and activist fatigue among LGBTQIA+ activists. It can explore the coping mechanisms and self-care practices that utilise positive emotions and contribute to activists' well-being and sustainability in their advocacy efforts (Doetsch-Kidder, 2012, p.121):

The emphasis on humor, fun, and pleasure in LGBTQ communities—using parties, art, and parades to raise awareness and money and to build community, for example— is not only a method of survival but also an important political resource and strategy. Feelings of joy and pleasure produce energy that sustains activists through conflicts and difficult work.

Beyond these protective measures against the struggles of LGBTQIA+ activism and the queer experience, this research also sheds light on the joy and hope that are inherent to these struggles. Indeed, previous studies (Westbrook and Shuster, 2023) have shown that being part of a marginalised group can be in itself a source of joy, similarly to Ahmed (2010) and Lorde's (1984) findings regarding the joy intrinsic to building a life that diverges from the norm of heterosexuality. By exploring the participants' life experiences in their activism and in their queerness, my research exposes how openly celebrating queer joy in a heteronormative society is a form of resistance (Turesky & Jae-an Crisman, 2023) and a vector for collective learning to take place, both within the queer community and outside of it.

Diving into the different meanings of joy in sociology and philosophy allowed me to observe its iterations in queer activism in varied forms. Initially I understood joy as an emotion similar to happiness and euphoria. I perceived queer joy to be political as an emotion that pulls queer individuals forward and to the forefront of public spaces during celebratory events like Pride. In the past few years the term "queer joy" started being used in online media, and on the blog platform of queer international organisation Outright, Kaplan (2024) discusses the impacts of celebrating queer joy:

From drag queens and Ball Culture to TV shows like "Queer Eye" and popular young adult books like "Heartstopper," these unapologetic expressions of queer joy don't just create pathways for self-acceptance. Bit by bit, they advance a more just society. Marches, rallies, and the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in positions of power further underscore the transformative power of this joy.

When researching this topic I discovered Spinoza's definition of joy described in Bergman and Montgomery's *Joyful Militancy* (2017, p.13) as "an increase in one's power to affect and be affected" and "the capacity to do and feel more". This brought my understanding of joy to a new level, as a catalyst for social change and collective learning.

Overall, exploring how joy and hope contribute to the sense of community and resilience among LGBTQIA+ activists can offer insights into strategies for building stronger networks and support structures. This research can help create environments that foster belonging and connection, enhancing the capacity of the community to navigate challenges and drive social change.

# Theoretical framework

## Critical systems theory (Watson & Watson)

System theories from the 1980s emerged in German sociology (Luhmann, 1995) and posit that society consists of interconnected autonomous social systems. These systems, including law, politics, economy, and education, have their own distinct internal regulations and methods of communication. As the field evolves, some researchers argue that applying a critical lens to systems theory is necessary when tackling social systems (Watson & Watson, 2013). Due to the conjunctural and multidimensional nature of social issues, the rationalism and empiricism proper to systems theory do not fit the requirements for social studies. Indeed, early systems theory tended to rely on a positivist epistemology inspired by natural sciences (Watson & Watson, 2013 p.113). This hard systems thinking approach was deemed inappropriate to study complex human issues (Checkland, 1999 & Jackson, 1985) and criticised for its engineering-like methods (Watson & Watson, 2013 p.114). I will therefore opt for a soft system thinking approach, which views social systems as multilayered and constructed by individuals influenced by cultural and psychological variables (Jackson, 1982 & 1985). Uniting the works of Schecter (1991) and Flood & Jackson (1991), Watson & Watson (2013) identify three principles of a critical systems' theory: critique, emancipation and pluralism. Holding critique as a principle in this context involves scrutinising the power structures and status quo within the system being studied. The principle of emancipation insists on liberating the social categories under study from this status quo, by amplifying marginalised narratives and questioning dominant voices. In this context, pluralism strives towards integrating diverse voices, experiences and stakeholders in the process of addressing systemic issues.

As the background to my research, this critical systems theory (Watson & Watson, 2013) and a soft systems thinking approach lays the foundations for an intersectional approach to the oppressions experienced by LGBTQIA+ activists.

## Intersectionality (Crenshaw, Collins) and queer intersectionality (Gray & Cooke, Bilge)

Crenshaw (1989, p.149) conceptualised intersectionality as "a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking." In this perspective, the prism of intersectionality can be used to analyse oppression as a multi-level issue affected by variables such as privilege and power structures.



Source : Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW).

While intersectionality can be apprehended through an additive lens of different layers of oppressions piling up on top of each other, for the purpose of this study I will refer to intersectionality as a tool to analyse oppression as an “overarching structure of domination”, in the spirit of Collins (1990, pp. 221–238) theorising Black Feminist Thought:

Instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination. Viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given socio historical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect. Assuming that each system needs the others in order to function creates a distinct theoretical stance that stimulates the rethinking of basic social science concepts.

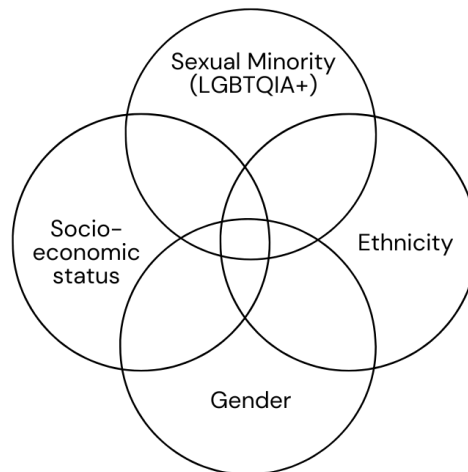
According to Gray & Cooke (2018), the interconnected oppressions faced by the LGBTQIA+ community created the need for a queer intersectionality. Gray and Cooke (2018) refer to the *It Gets Better* initiative to exemplify the problem of a queer activism that tends to majorly benefit the most privileged members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Founded in 2010 in the US by gay activist Dan Savage and his husband Teddy Miller, the *It Gets Better* project

aimed to offer reassurance to teenage viewers facing homophobic or transphobic bullying, conveying the message that circumstances would improve over time. Depicting mostly middle-class white gay men's experience of queerness, the project received backlash at the time for omitting the multifaceted dimension of queerphobia, similarly to the 2011 SlutWalk and Occupy Wall Street movements, both analysed by Bilge (2012, p.19) in 'Developing Intersectional Solidarities: a plea for queer intersectionality':

Consider the following examples of the SlutWalk, the It Gets Better Project, and Occupy Wall Street. Although there is growing sympathy for these movements, in all three cases voices have been raised to deplore how well-intentioned movements inadvertently (re)produce oppression along one or several axes of power – even while attempting to combat it along other axes. In their attempts to contest domination and redress injustice, all three of these movements have been criticized for their failure to take into account the multiple and co-constitutive makeup of power/privilege complex, with its interlocking structural and ideological underpinnings.

In regards to these considerations, I created the diagram below to illustrate the queer intersectionality framework I will use for my data analysis in this study. The four main variables are, in no hierarchical order:

1. Sexual minority: which community/communities does the person relate to, if any?  
This variable also includes the question of belonging and takes into account the fact that some people might not find their place in any of these.
2. Ethnicity: cultural and emotional belonging to one or several cultural backgrounds, this variable includes the historical trauma and current discriminations lived by some ethnic groups (e.g Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), displaced populations, refugees etc)
3. Gender: gender conformity or nonconformity as well as gender fluidity and trans identity, this variable does not necessarily take into account the gender assigned at birth.
4. Socio-economic status: financial situation as well as social class, this variable is a combination of income, education, posture in society and access to economic resources.



## Queer feminist theory

### Postmodern and contemporary feminism

Postmodern feminist theory stands out from previous waves of feminism by rejecting essentialist understandings of gender (Butler, 1990), masculinity and power (hooks, 1999 & 2004). Butler (1990) criticises the rigidity of identity politics among second-wave feminism, where universal concepts of gender binary and sexuality were vehiculated. Similarly, hooks (2004) challenges the patriarchal archetype of manhood by studying the phenomena of toxic masculinity and the role of cultural conditioning in causing harm to men since childhood. Butler (1990) introduces the idea that gender is performative, and exists as the norms, attitudes and societal expectations that people comply with. By studying the intersections of love and power, hooks (1999) exposes how patriarchy, racism and capitalism play against our capacity to create systems of care and solidarity. In the same vein, Butler (1990) interrogates the binary categories of “men” and “women” through the prism of different factors such as race, class or sexuality, therefore paving the way for an intersectional feminist theory.

French decolonial and antiracist feminism, carried by authors and activists such as Rokhaya Diallo and Fatima Ouassak, tackles social issues faced by minorities in an intersectional approach. In the line of afrofeminism and antiracist education, Diallo (2019) questions the global injunction to assimilation addressed to ethnic and religious minorities in France.

Criticised for not assimilating to French culture and accused of communitarianism by French mass media, Muslim women and girls are policed by the law for wearing abayas (Goksedef, 2023), niqabs and burqas (Miles, 2018) with the argument that it goes against secularism. This injunction to assimilation, along with the police harassment, dechildisation (“désenfantisation<sup>2</sup>”, a term coined by Fatima Ouassak (2023)) and discrimination experienced by ethnic minorities and denounced by Diallo and Ouassak (2023) are experiences far too common among minorities, including sexual minorities. The racialised policing of gendered clothing coheres with queer political interests, particularly in supporting the presence of religious and sexual minorities in public spaces. Prior to their dissolution by the French government in 2021, the CCIF (Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France) partnered with Ouassak's group Front de mères to advocate for the rights of Muslim mothers who wear headscarves to serve as school excursion guides, since the Chatel circular of 2012 (circulaire n° 2012-056, 27-3-2012) was endangering this right (Le Monde, 2013). Similarly, queer activism advocates for people's right to occupy and transit through public spaces. For instance, US trans activist Sarah McBride's legal fight to lift anti-trans bathroom bans in Delaware is recounted in her memoir (McBride, 2018). Diallo, Ouassak and other contemporary French feminist theorists such as Françaises Vergès, Houria Bouteldja, and Elsa Dorlin call for a “convergence of struggles” (*convergence des luttes* in French), encouraging different activist movements to join forces in order to fight systemic oppression together. By highlighting the interconnectedness of various struggles, *convergence des luttes* aims to foster solidarity among diverse communities and create bridges between feminism, anti-racism, LGBTQIA+ activism, environmental activism.

The contemporary queer activism that I will study in this dissertation draws from theoretical foundations and worldviews laid by these authors, under the overarching perspective that the personal is political. Therefore, I choose to use these queer feminist theoretical foundations as a starting point to study the collective learning processes at play in LGBTQIA+ activism for social change.

## Queer phenomenology

Ahmed (2006) theorises a queer phenomenology with the aim to “offer a new way of thinking about the spatiality of sexuality, gender, and race” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 4). Through studying the spatial interactions of bodies in society, she observes a parallel between heterosexual

---

<sup>2</sup> Phenomenon where young people from post-colonial immigration descent who live in working-class areas are treated not as children but as threats to the system, and more likely than White children to be victims of discrimination and unfair treatments from the institutions in power (Ouassak, F. 2023. *La puissance des mères*.)

orientation and the visual representation of a straight line: heterosexuality is perceived as “the norm” in society, and bodies that do not conform to this norm are perceived as deviant from this line (Kojima, 2008, p.89).

In a context where heterosexuality is perceived as the norm, Ahmed explains the phenomenon of compulsory heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2006, p.84) through the metaphor of straightening devices (Ahmed, 2006, p.92): through their lifepath, individuals are pushed by tacit dynamics to pursue a straight lifestyle, passing down their bloodline to future generations and directing their sexuality exclusively to the opposite gender (Kojima, 2008, p.89). Drawing inspiration from Butler’s (1999) concept of gender performativity, Ahmed (2006) posits repetitive performativity as the phenomenon through which bodies are slowly shaped in distinct ways that “enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 91).

When a body deviates from “the grid of heterosexual lines” (Kojima, 2008, p.90), Ahmed names this phenomenon “contingency”. This happens through a contact which sparks a desire for another object, creating a shift in direction, and this is where the queer orientation originates in Ahmed’s queer phenomenology. I personally disagree with this point, because it implies that an individual could become queer through specific life experiences that deviates them from the norm. I prefer considering that queer individuals do not require experiencing any shift in order to be queer. In the line of contemporary queer theorists such as Judith Butler, I perceive queerness as a part of one’s being that has always been here, therefore I do not consider one becomes queer but rather one becomes aware of one’s queerness at some point in one’s life. Therefore, while Ahmed’s concept of contingency does not seem relevant to me when it comes to the personal dimension of queer identity, it can be used to interrogate how the heteronormative framework conditions our understanding of the world in an intersectional perspective.

## A bottom-up approach to collective liberation (Collins, 2019) and the theory of collective learning (Kilgore, 1999)

By highlighting how different power dynamics interact within a system, intersectionality challenges the idea that mainstream theories of power and politics are universally applicable. Collins (2019, p.36) argues that the historical exclusion of groups such as Black people, women, and ethnic minorities from full citizenship rights in the US reveals the



limitations of dominating theories such as liberalism or conservatism. Widening the scope outside of the US shows that none of the prevailing theories of power and resulting political systems were originally designed with marginalised groups in consideration. Collins (2019, p.37) continues by stating that inclusion for appearance's sake doesn't guarantee meaningful political impact, and merely appears as tokenism. According to Collins (2019, p.38), opting for a bottom-up approach is necessary for participatory democracy to be truly efficient: "To survive, participatory democracy and intersectionality must develop roots within existing communities of inquiry and praxis as well as build new coalitional communities. Such communities can draw upon flexible solidarity to help withstand the tests of time."

LGBTQIA+ activism emerges from the marginalised identities of queer people, uniting from the bottom to advocate for their rights as a group with a shared vision of social justice. These grassroots initiatives create fertile grounds for processes of collective learning to happen, as theorised by Kilgore (1999). Sitting at the intersection of critical theory and postmodernism, collective learning is defined by Kilgore (1999, p.191) as "the order that arises from chaos", and can be understood as the agency of collective identities born from the interplay of diverse perspectives and experiences. In Kilgore's theory, collective social action initially grows from shared meanings and a common vision of social justice (1999, p.195). Integrating ideas from contemporary social movements theory and sociocultural learning theory, Kilgore's epistemological stance aims to examine a group as a cohesive entity while still acknowledging the individual roles within the group's learning journey (1999, p.196).

In this study, I have used insights drawn from Collins' (2019) arguments for a bottom-up approach to collective liberation and from Kilgore's (1999) theory of collective learning as a framework to analyse the educational dimension of LGBTQIA+ activism.

## Critical review of literature

I have focused my literature review on a period from the early 2000s until now, in a wish to build on the most recent research for the sake of relevance and accuracy. The literature explored comes from a range of queer and allied authors and activists, of political stances that evolve from progressive to radical or anarchist in certain cases. It covers different genres including academic research, interviews, essays and memoirs by activists, and politically experimental manifestos. The research I have used is US or Europe-based and compiles the work of Black feminist authors, abolitionists, anti-racism advocates, queer and

disability justice activists. This critical literature review will explore the themes of joy, hope, the queer experience, LGBTQIA+ activism and collective power on three different scales:

1. The individual dimension : happiness, aliveness and joy in marginalisation
2. The bridge from individual to collective : by healing the world, queer joy is political
3. The collective dimension : the centrality of relationships and an ethic of love

Starting from an individual perspective, it makes sense to point out the research gap highlighted by Shuster & Westbrook (2022) in their work exploring the joy deficit in social studies related to the trans experience. This joy deficit can be noticed in studies related to the queer experience, included but not limited to the trans experience. I will now dive deeper into the notions of happiness and joy represented in the literature that relate to the individual life experiences of queerness.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed (2010, p.79) explains that “happiness demands adjusting your body to a world that has already taken shape”, which equates to conforming to the heteronormative ideals of society (McGlynn et al., 2020: 1121). In common representations of Western cultures, the concept of happiness corresponds to a certain archetype reproduced to some degree in the average Western individual’s social conditioning. We are socialised towards building our adult lives around a nuclear family structure, composed of a heterosexual marriage and children. This archetype, although scrutinised, criticised and rejected by some, still influences our life aspirations as we cross paths with diverse “straightening devices” conceptualised by Ahmed (2006, p.92). McGlynn (2020) argues that “happiness, formed through unconscious and presumed heterosexualities, does not necessarily make LGBTQ lives liveable” (2020: 1121).

In a context where happiness stems from conforming to the heterosexual criteria of society, it seems fair to assume that queer people would require a different approach to self-fulfilment. Ahmed therefore posits the concept of “aliveness” as “as an alternative social value to happiness” (2010, p.79). In these terms, aiming for aliveness implies finding joy in deviating from “the grid of heterosexual lines” (Kojima, 2008, p.90). This can look like finding fulfilment in self-determination outside of the heterosexual norms of gender and sexuality, and thriving through the challenges experienced (McGlynn, p.1130). In this sense aliveness can be linked to the concept of erotic knowledge theorised by Audre Lorde (1984, p.57):

For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us

to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.

The fieldwork conducted by Westbrook and Shuster (2023, p.18) in their study on marginalisation in the transgender experience have shown that being a part of a marginalised community can in itself be a source of joy. Their participants explained that embracing their transgender identity has enriched their lives and worldviews, while also providing a sense of self-confidence and body positivity (2023, p.18). In this sense, focusing on joy and hope goes beyond the superficial aim of contrasting the research focus usually placed on trauma, mental health issues and discrimination. It is not about ignoring the struggles of queer activism for the benefit of highlighting the positive aspects instead, but rather shedding a light on the joy that is also present within these struggles. For instance, contrary to the popular belief that being part of a marginalised group equals being miserable, Westbrook and Shuster's (2023) work exposes that marginalisation creates a sense of freedom and peace with the world (p.18), improves quality of life and increases connection with others (p.19). By not settling for "the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe" (Lorde, 1984, p.57), queer individuals find joy in their personal life experiences.

The self-actualisation experienced by queer individuals creates a bridge towards a collective experience of joy, hope and positive emotions in LGBTQIA+ activism. In fact, the individual and the collective go hand in hand when it comes to joy, pleasure and healing. In their memoir, genderqueer activist Jacob Tobia (2019, pp.7-8) argues that healing oneself from gender-based trauma and healing the world are two sides of the same coin:

Healing continues as you learn to claim that others should not have to endure what you have endured. Eventually, the line between healing your injury and healing the world begins to blur. Your healing becomes uncontainable. It expands in every direction, radiating out of you and into the world. It unfurls to touch everyone you love, everyone who crosses your path. It becomes unstoppable, and ultimately, it transforms the world.

This posture echoes Lorde's (1988, 130) argument that self-care and self-love will inevitably ricochet to become political resistance: "Caring for ourselves is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Similarly, Adrienne Maree Brown (2019, p.321) conceptualises pleasure as an individual force that creates collective power within a framework of pleasure activism:

True pleasure — joy, happiness and satisfaction — has been the force that helps us move beyond the constant struggle, that helps us live and generate futures beyond this dystopian present, futures worthy of our miraculous lives. Pleasure — embodied, connected pleasure — is one of the ways we know when we are free. That we are always free. That we always have the power to co-create the world.

While I support these postures, I feel it is necessary to ground them in their context. As Black queer feminists, I perceive Lorde and Brown's stance of reclaiming self-care and pleasure to be acts of activism because these experiences of joy, pleasure and self-love have been historically taken away from oppressed minorities. This is where positionality becomes important. As a white, cisgender woman I have witnessed that vindicating for self-care and pleasure can go against collective interest when not operated from a critical standpoint: this is how problematic White feminism emerged, as well as gay rights advocacy focused mainly on white men's rights, and so on. Therefore, I consider that self-care, self-love, healing and pleasure can become political resistance only when contextualised in an intersectional approach to social issues. Regarding my positionality in this research as a white cisgender woman, I do not consider reclaiming my self-care and pleasure to be acts of resistance, since these things were never taken away from me. However as a bisexual woman and member of the LGBTQIA+ community, I perceive my expression of queer joy to be an act of political resistance in itself, as the reclaiming of our right to spread joy and hope goes against the historical oppression of the queer community.

Similarly to Black queer feminist authors viewing self-care and pleasure as acts of resistance, Turesky & Jae-an Crisman (2023) offer a reading of queer spatial joy as political resistance. Heteronormative representations tend to view Pride marches as "an expression of desire for inclusion in dominant society" (Turesky & Jae-an Crisman, 2023, p.270), which is quite reductive as it presents queerness only as a minority in relation to the dominant majority. Conversely, building on Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy (2016), Turesky and Jae-an Crisman posit that expressing public queer joy in heteronormative spaces in the early LA Pride marches was in itself an act of resistance :

By taking joy in one's own identity, an identity constituted from all that is antithetical to heteropatriarchal culture, one also disrupts the comfort of that culture. The queer joy of Pride also holds tight to the feminist killjoy within its performance. Thus, Pride demonstrates a powerful message to "the straight state" (Canaday, 2009) precisely because its central purpose is for queer pleasure. (Turesky & Jae-an Crisman, 2023, p.270)

Advancing further on the line from individual to collective experiences of joy in literature on queer activism, I now want to bring in Spinoza's definition of joy, explained by Bergman and

Montgomery (2017, p.13) as “not an emotion at all, but an increase in one’s power to affect and be affected. It is the capacity to do and feel more. As such, it is connected to creativity and the embrace of uncertainty.” In this understanding, joy is a sense of power that permeates from the individual to the collective sphere, without being necessarily linked to positive emotions. In their radical anarchist manifesto *Joyful Militancy*, Bergman and Montgomery (2017, p.19, p.27) define joy as “an intensification of life itself”, and their interviewee Silvia Federici describes joy as “a feeling, a passion, that comes from a process of transformation”. Bergman and Montgomery (2017, p.19) introduce the concept of joyful transformation in activism as follows:

Anyone who has been transformed through a struggle can attest to its power to open up more capacities for resistance, creativity, action, and vision. This sense of collective power — the sense that things are different, that we are different, that a more capable “we” is forming that didn’t exist before — is what we mean by “joyful transformation.” This transformation is by nature collective, and relies heavily on relationships.

The centrality of relationships in undoing oppression has been discussed by queer disability justice advocate Mia Mingus (2012):

“Any kind of systematic change we want to make will require us to work together to do it. And we have to have relationships strong enough to hold us as we go up against something as powerful as the state, the medical industrial complex, the prison system, the gender binary system, the church, immigration system, the war machine, global capitalism. (...) We must roll up our sleeves and start doing the hard work of learning how to work through conflict, pain and hurt as if our lives depended on it—because they do.”

Several queer activists and theorists wrote about the necessity of fostering love and strong relationships in any type of activism. Here the notion of love has nothing to do with romantic love, it refers to an ethic of empathy and care applied to one’s community and other communities. When writing about love as the practice of freedom, bell hooks (2006, p.244) advocates for an ethic of love to counteract the human tendency of self-focus in pursuing social change. She explains that focusing exclusively on dismantling systems that directly oppress us leads to inadvertently perpetuating these systems, while we enable them to oppress others (2006, p.243). To avoid this pitfall, bell hooks argues for a focus on love in discourse and concrete actions for activism, stating that “As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation, we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.” (ibid.)

In a similar vein, in her interview with Bergman and Montgomery (2017, p.56) Mingus talks about assertive and accountable love in queerness:

What I'm talking about is reinventing how we love each other and knowing that solidarity is love, collaboration is love. And really, isn't that what queerness is about: loving? I am talking about growing and cultivating a deep love that starts with those closest to us and letting it permeate out. Starting with our own communities. Building strong foundations of love.

This ethic of love and care is also present in the work of disability justice advocate Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. In her essay "Care as pleasure" published in Adrienne Maree Brown's manifesto *Pleasure Activism* (2019, p.232), she writes:

I want everyone to be able to create wildly intimate, healing relationships where your care needs are present in the room, not crammed in the garbage. I want everyone to have access to this joyful, dangerous, wide-open pleasure, because it's the vulnerable strength we all deserve.

On this continuum exploring the three scales of how joy, happiness, love, healing, hope and care manifest in LGBTQIA+ contemporary activism I have attempted to highlight the different ways in which the personal and the collective interlock in the current landscape of queer activism and research. I chose to provide different meanings to the concepts of joy, happiness and love through the literature with the aim to create a nuanced framework that will hopefully allow me to observe and analyse these phenomena in the field.

## Methodology

### Outline of this chapter

This chapter delineates the different parts of my methodology for this research, in the structure of a funnel. It starts with positioning my project within the realm of qualitative research, by explaining my choice of using qualitative methods instead of quantitative. Then, I delimitate the context of my field work as an exploratory case study by presenting the Maltese and French organisations I have worked with. The next subsection justifies the use

of phenomenology by introducing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and explaining its purpose in my dissertation.

The following parts describe my sampling and data collection, before diving into the combination of IPA and thematic analysis that I will use in the following phase of data analysis. The chapter then closes on the limitations caused by these choices of research methods.

## The choice of qualitative research

Morse & Field (1996, p.2) explain that the choice between using quantitative or qualitative research methods relies heavily on the nature of the phenomena being studied: quantitative methods are usually applied to concrete phenomena which can be measured, and have been studied extensively enough to conduct experiments on them ; while qualitative methods are commonly used to explore phenomena in relatively new areas and in a more inductive approach. Morse & Field (1996, p.11) also place the maturity of the concept as an indicator to whether a quantitative or qualitative approach could be the most appropriate: in this perspective, a concept that has been extensively researched and theorised constitutes solid ground for a quantitative research method, while a topic with little information available in the literature calls for a qualitative approach instead.

Considering my research targets a context that is constantly evolving (youth movements in LGBTQIA+ activism), the choice of a qualitative approach came naturally when I started planning my project. Furthermore, the fact that social research operates within a wider political framework (Bryman, 2004) indicates that qualitative methods can reveal the underlying meanings, cultural norms and social processes that quantitative data alone might overlook. Queer joy is related to several areas that cannot be interrogated with quantitative methods: social issues, politics, emotions, sense of self and collective identity, and so on. I noticed the presence of joy and hope as recurring patterns throughout the history of queer activism and I wanted to interrogate it: where does it come from and what has sustained it until now? What roles does joy play in the collective learning happening in situ in the youth movements I am studying? According to Morse & Field (1996, p.14), a qualitative research design serves precisely this purpose of understanding a phenomenon within a group of people:

Qualitative research is used to describe how groups of people live or how people cope with their daily lives. Qualitative research provides the reader with understanding and enables others to make sense of reality. While qualitative research may describe phenomena in detail, qualitative research cannot usually be used to answer questions that will prove causality. Neither can it be used to answer questions of 'how much' or 'how many'. Thus, qualitative researchers usually approach a topic or a setting by asking themselves, 'What is going on here?', and systematically exploring the topic or setting as a learner, holding assumptions and knowledge in 'abeyance' until it is confirmed.

## Case study with a phenomenological approach

For my research, I chose to conduct a case study with a phenomenological approach. Yin (2009) has identified three types of case studies methods in research: descriptive, explanatory and exploratory. Commonly used as an initial step in exploring new areas of scientific inquiry where necessary data is currently lacking (Yin, 2009 & Mills et al., 2010), the exploratory case study is a relevant method when diving into recent and evolving domains of social research. Contemporary social issues tend to lack prior extensive research and clear hypotheses for testing, which are two traits proper to the use of an exploratory case study (Mills et al., 2010). LGBTQIA+ activism being a relatively recent field of inquiry with a research gap on questions related to joy (see Research Gap section of my Introduction), I chose to opt for an exploratory case study for my research.

I will now refer to several elements of my theoretical framework in order to present the epistemological foundations for this case study. I am opting for an intersectional approach in the spirit of Black feminist thought, which implies viewing the distinct systems of oppression (e.g racism, sexism, ableism, classism) as “being part of one overarching structure of domination” (Collins, 1990). This epistemological stance falls within the postmodern feminist worldview according to which the personal is perceived as political, carried by authors such as bell hooks (1984) or Collins (1990). This worldview has since then been reused by queer intersectional theorists (Bilge, 2012) to form a political claim for the development of intersectional solidarities, which is also what French decolonial and feminist thinkers advocate for when pushing for a convergence of struggles (Ouassak 2023, Diallo 2019). Collins (2019) argues for intersectional and class solidarities at the foundations of grassroots initiatives, in order to develop a flexible solidarity that could help sustain these initiatives through time. This bottom-up approach goes hand in hand with Kilgore’s definition of collective learning, as “the order that arises from chaos” (1999, p.191), and this is particularly relevant in activism contexts: the groups I studied emerged from individuals uniting around a



common vision for social change, and through self-organisation they learn from each other as they build up their advocacy.

I started my field work in Malta by reaching out to the Malta Gay Rights Movements (MGRM) and Young Progressive Beings (YPB). These groups state their positionality within an intersectional scope and operate on the foundations of a bottom-up approach. On MGRM's website, the following core values indicate an intersectional dimension to the group's posture: "Solidarity with other discriminated groups of people with mutual support in combating oppression and discrimination and fighting for equality in Malta as well as with other regions of the world", "Respect and Recognition for the fundamental cultural, social and economic as well as civil and political human rights, with particular emphasis on equality and freedom from discrimination, gender equality and the right to self-determination" (MGRM, 2024). While the Young Progressive Beings movement does not have a website, its members have stated their intersectional stance in interviews ("YPB is a radical, intersectional, eco-feminist pro-choice group", Fenech Conti, 2020) and in their volunteer recruitment calls via their Facebook page ("If you are a leftist intersectional feminist who wants to act up and bring about change, then Young Progressive Beings is looking for you." YPB, 2021<sup>3</sup>).

Both YPB and MGRM were created in a bottom-up approach, by individual citizens expressing discontent towards different aspects of Maltese society. MGRM was created as a response to homophobia (MGRM, 2024):

MGRM was set up in 2001 by a small group of volunteers who were determined to bring about change. They were committed to setting up a helpline and to start raising awareness and combating the stigma faced by the LGBTIQ community. With no premises, no funds and very little expertise they set about making a difference.

YPB's creation was sparked by a demand for better sex education and decriminalisation of abortion (Weenink, 2019):

Ensuring excellent sex education is provided in all schools, access to better sex-health services and free contraceptives and finally decriminalising abortion. These are the first set of demands from Young Progressive Beings; an organisation set up by Maltese youth who want to mobilise social change.

Since their creation, both organisations have been facilitating community-building events, which include community dance classes, queer film clubs, community workshops in arts and

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=602530474443253&set=a.130113181684987>

crafts, community dialogues and discussion circles on specific topics, community gardening and queer ecology circles. All these events participate in developing a sense of collective identity, group consciousness, solidarity and organisation, which are the four principles of Kilgore's theory of collective learning in social movements (1999, p.197):

Collective identity answers the question, 'Who are we?'. It consists of learning components like taken-as-shared meanings that may lead the group to a course of collective action. Group consciousness is the awareness of the group as a social actor. The group develops this notion of itself through its experience constructing a collective identity and acting collectively. Solidarity is a general feeling of unity or affinity among members of a group. Solidarity draws individuals to engage in the group process and the group becomes more confident of itself as a collective change agent. Organization includes technical features of the group like size, mode(s) of communication, member roles and material resources.

Over the course of several months I attended a variety of events hosted by MGRM and YPB: film screenings, community gardening events with Friends of the Earth, hikes in Malta and Gozo, quiz nights. During these events I met members of LGBTI+ Gozo and they invited me to attend one of their executive meetings upon hearing about my project.



# EVENTS & ACTIVITIES

## APRIL 2024

05 FRI	COMMUNITY DIALOGUE: OPEN DISCUSSION MCVS, Valletta // 7:00 pm
09   16 23   30 TUES	COMMUNITY DANCE CLASSES JPR Building, San Ġwann // 7:00pm
19 FRI	LGBTIQ+ MIGRANT MEETUP Contact +356 99255559 for more info
20 SAT	YOGA WITH NIK The Meeting Place, Marsa // 5:00 pm
20 SAT	LET'S PLAY BOARDGAMES The Meeting Place, Marsa // 6:30 pm
21 SUN	HORSE RIDING, WASHING & GROOMING RMJ Rescue, Siġġiewi // 10:00 am
26 FRI	QUEER FILM CLUB: RAFIKI Kixott, Mosta // 7:00 pm
27 SAT	MGRM X FOTE X GEĠWIĠĠJA: COMMUNITY GARDENING, HANGOUT & QUEER ECOLOGY READING CIRCLE Friends of the Earth, Floriana // 2:00 pm

Source: MGRM Instagram page



Source: YPB's instagram page

## Phenomenological approach: the use of IPA

According to Smith et al. (2009, p.8), opting for a phenomenological approach means adopting “a philosophical approach to the study of experience”. In this sense, using phenomenology in a qualitative study becomes relevant when a researcher seeks to observe and analyse specific aspects of the human experience. In contemporary queer studies, phenomenology has been used for instance to shed light on the real-life experiences of college-aged transgender patients receiving healthcare (Schaffer, 2015), to gain an in-depth understanding of the social interactions between young bisexual individuals and their peers in high school (Quest, 2014), or to study the lived experiences on LGBTQIA+ youth in foster care (Barnett, 2018). When presenting different approaches suitable to different types of research questions, Smith et al. (2009, p.40, box 3.1) define the key feature of the IPA approach as a “focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience”. My research seeks to understand the individual

and collective experience of joy and hope within the activism of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the data I will collect aims to shed light on how my participants make sense of this joy in their queer experience and activism.

Smith et al. (2009, p.10) explain their Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis using insights from philosophers, such as Husserl's focus on understanding the essence of the experience, Heidegger's concepts of intersubjectivity and worldliness, Merleau-Ponty's idea of embodiment, and Sartre's concept of nothingness.

In this complex and enriched sense, 'experience' for IPA is not simply a 'thing that happened to someone' or merely an intrapsychic state, as it might be in everyday usage. Instead, in IPA research we are attempting to understand other people's relationship to the world and we are usually focusing on a particular event, relationship or process in that person's world when doing so. Our attempts are necessarily interpretative, and will focus upon participants' efforts to make meanings out of their activities and of the things happening to them. (Smith et al., 2009, p.17)

According to Smith et al. (2009, p.19), the interpretive nature of IPA offers an added value to the analysis, by allowing us "to see how our analyses might offer meaningful insights which exceed and subsume the explicit claims of our participants." Therefore, the researcher using IPA can provide insights into the interviews that the participant might not have considered. This might happen by carefully analysing the transcripts, recognizing patterns across diverse sources of data (e.g interviews, participants' diaries, participatory observation on the field), and engaging with the researcher's theoretical frameworks (ibid).

## Sampling

My sampling took place in three successive phases. First, I placed participation calls in LGBTQIA+ centres across Paris: La Bulle Maison des Solidarités LGBTQIA+ and the Centre LGBTQIA+ of Beaubourg; as well as in the headquarters of two Maltese NGOs: MGRM and Moviment Graffiti (headquarters of YPB). These participation calls explain the profiles I was seeking for semi-structured interviews: LGBTQIA+ activists and/or artists or performers, working with an organisation or not, doing volunteering or social work related to queer issues, creating and/or performing queer art (e.g painting, creative writing, drag, etc).

The second phase took place after I extended my personal network of LGBTQIA+ activists and artists in Paris and in Malta, in the form of purposeful sampling. After interacting with members of the organisations where I placed my participation calls, I was able to count on

some of them to act as gatekeepers that referred me to potential participants, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009, p.44). The gatekeepers of MGRM also referred me to another queer organisation that I did not know about: LGBTI+ Gozo. These referrals allowed me to select potential participants for more data collection. This purposeful sampling went hand in hand with the third phase, which is snowball sampling: once I have established contact with potential participants, I asked them to forward the call to three or more people from their networks.

## Data collection

When it comes to the prerequisites of an exploratory case study, Yin (2009, p.37) states that “even an exploratory case study should be preceded by statements about what is to be explored, the purpose of the exploration, and the criteria by which the exploration will be judged successful”. Since the purpose of the exploration has been discussed in the Introduction (see Problem Statement and Relevance of this study to the field), I will dedicate this part to “what is to be explored” and the criteria as mentioned by Yin (2009, p.37).

My data collection in Malta took place in the following forms:

- Participatory observation and note-taking during meetings and events conducted by YPB, MGRM and LGBTI+ Gozo
- Semi-structured interviews with members of these groups
- Semi-structured interviews with other activists, youth workers and performers

I also collected data in France in the following forms:

- Semi-structured interviews of LGBTQIA+ activists
- Participatory observation of LGBTQIA+ social events and parties in Paris : the Pride des Banlieues in June 2024, lesbian and queer parties by Barbieturix and P3 Paris

I conducted eleven interviews: six with Maltese participants (one with an MGRM activist, one with a YPB activist, two with government officers, one with a youth worker, one with a drag performer), one focus group with the executive members of LGBTI+ Gozo, three interviews with French participants (one activist from the Centre LGBTQIA+ of Paris and one psychology intern at La Bulle) and one with a Belgian youth activist.

When it comes to “the criteria by which the exploration will be judged successful” (Yin, 2009, p.37), the key element is that the data collected provides in-depth insights on the

connections between the phenomenon of joy and the collective learning processes at play in the lived experiences of the participants. The use of semi-structured interviews analysed with IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) is relevant in this case according to Smith et al. (2009, p.54):

In IPA, as we have seen, we are aiming to design data collection events which elicit detailed stories, thoughts and feelings from the participant. Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have tended to be the preferred means for collecting such data (see Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, for a review). One-to-one interviews are easily managed, allowing a rapport to be developed and giving participants the space to think, speak and be heard. They are therefore well-suited to in-depth and personal discussion.

## Data analysis : IPA and thematic analysis

In order to analyse the data collected through the interviews, I used IPA as conceptualised by Smith et. al (2009) and thematic analysis as theorised by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” Combining these two methods allowed more flexibility in my data analysis: while IPA is rooted in a previously established theoretical framework, that is not the case for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81). I used my theoretical framework as the foundation for my data analysis, however involving thematic analysis allowed the data to evolve within this framework and expand beyond it.

Braun and Clarke's distinction between semantic and latent themes (2006, p.84) exposes the interpretative possibilities offered by thematic analysis:

A thematic analysis typically focuses exclusively or primarily on one level. With a semantic approach, the themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written. (...) In contrast, a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.

## Limitations due to choice of research method

Exploratory case studies are often used to investigate new or evolving areas of research, whereas phenomenology focuses on accessing a deep comprehension of individual

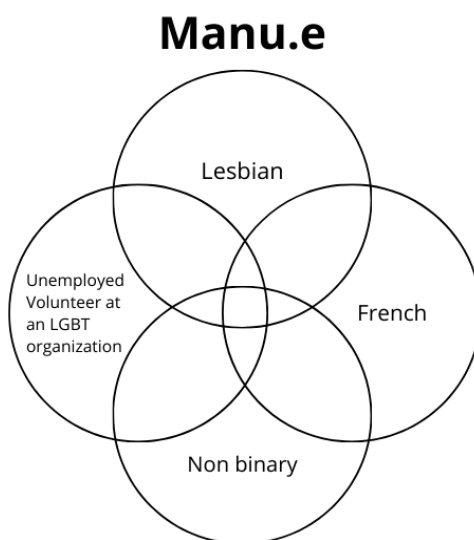
experiences. Therefore, integrating these two approaches into my research and combining them has required multiple layers of analysis. Regarding the scope of this research, the case study's exploratory nature risked bringing surface-level insights which endangered the depth of the phenomenological analysis. On the other hand, the in-depth analysis required when using IPA could lead to very contextualised and personalised results that would not be easily transferable to different scales, settings or populations. Lastly, both approaches required a certain level of interpretation from the researcher, which introduced a risk of bias despite the researcher's effort to maintain an objective and reflective posture. Similarly, I felt that participants might have tailored their responses and contributions to their understanding of the aims of the study, so I tried my best to not let it affect the authenticity of the data collected.



# Results

## Presentation of participants

My data collection consisted mainly of interviews, as none of my participants opted for any of the alternative modes of participation I offered (written contribution or photovoice). The participants are activists, educators, youth workers, drag performers and represent a diverse range of identities and sexual orientations within the LGBTQIA+ community. Besides, two of the participants are heterosexual allies, which was a beautiful surprise as their contribution turned out to be very relevant to this project. As explained in the theoretical framework, I analysed the data according to a queer intersectionality framework, which I will now use to introduce my participants.

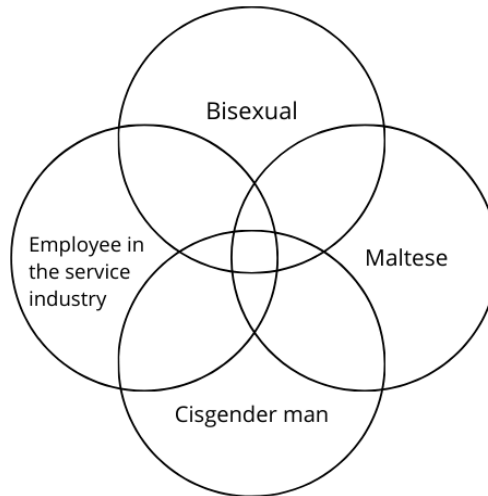


Born and raised in Paris, France, Manu.e (they/them), currently unemployed, benefits from the Disabled Adults Allowance (AAH in French) and volunteers twenty-five hours a week at the Centre LGBTQI+ of Paris-Beaubourg. They use the term “lesbian” to refer to their sexuality as an AFAB (assigned female at birth) individual, since their queer education was made in Paris by lesbians elders in the 1990s. Manu.e is in the process of introducing the “iel”<sup>4</sup> as their gender pronoun in French. When Manu.e went to the United States years ago to meet the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, everyone used the “they” pronoun to refer to them in English, which made them decide to implement it back home in France.

---

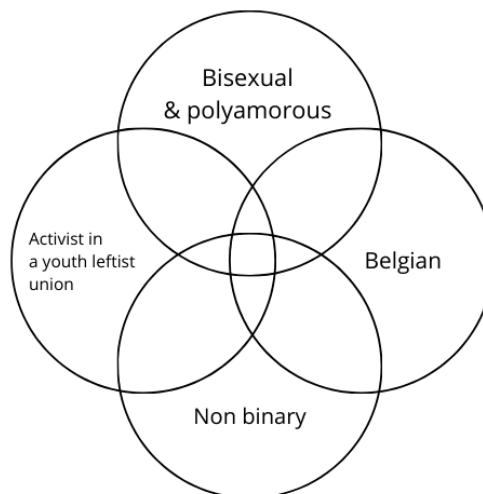
<sup>4</sup> French equivalent of “they” as a gender pronoun (Le Robert, n.d.)

## Sean



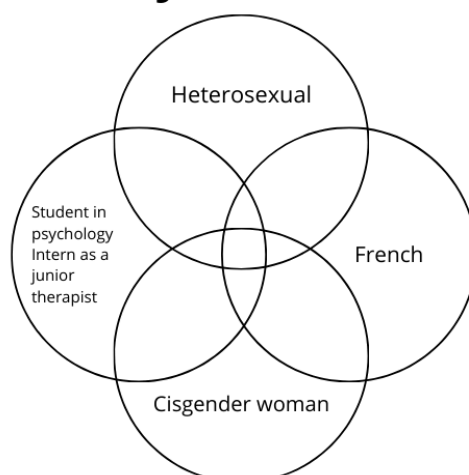
Sean (he/him) is a bisexual man who volunteers part-time with the feminist group Young Progressive Beings in Malta. After growing up in the US and moving back to Malta twelve years ago, Sean now works in a bar and participates in social activism for women and minorities rights in Malta.

## Charlie



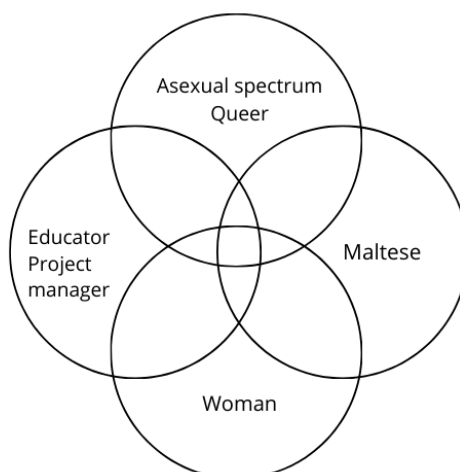
Charlie (they/them) is a radical leftist youth activist from Liège, Belgium, who moved to Malta for a year. Their activism focuses on students and workers' rights as well as queer issues, and they are now a full-time employee at the youth branch of their city's radical leftist union back home.

## Juliette



Juliette (she/her) is a French student conducting her internship at La Bulle - Maison des Solidarités LGBTQIA+ in Paris. This internship takes place in her fifth year of studying, and she wants to specialise her practice on transcultural and minorities' issues. At La Bulle, she co-facilitates therapy sessions and hosts weekly artistic workshops for queer refugees. Juliette is a straight ally and her work focuses on helping queer refugees to embrace and navigate their queerness in their immigration journey in France.

## Marthese



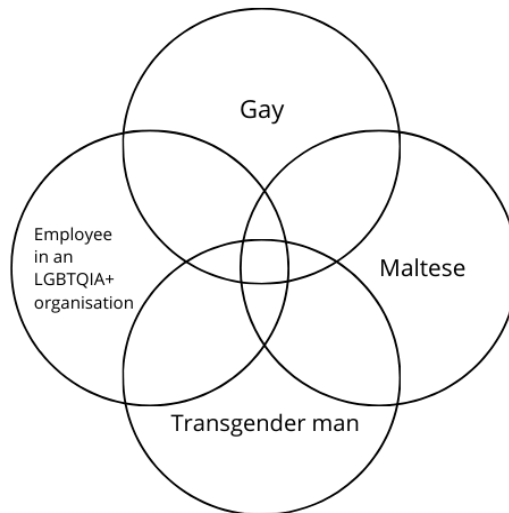
Marthese (she/they) is a Maltese youth facilitator, educator and project manager. In 2018 she led a series of creative writing workshops which gave birth to the Kitba Queer Anthology<sup>5</sup>, a collaborative project created by Maltese queer youth. From a working class

---

<sup>5</sup> More information [here](#).

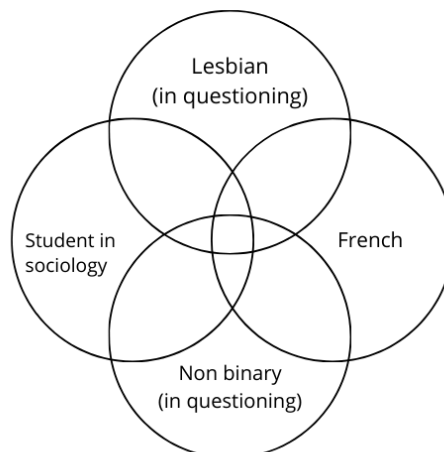
background, Marthese has led many creative projects targeting queer youth including queer writing workshops and camps.

## Alex



Alex (he/him) is currently the only full-time employee at MGRM. He started activism by protesting for refugees' rights in Malta, and after being outed on TV as a transgender man he chose to use this media exposure for trans and queer rights in Malta, which led to him joining MGRM.

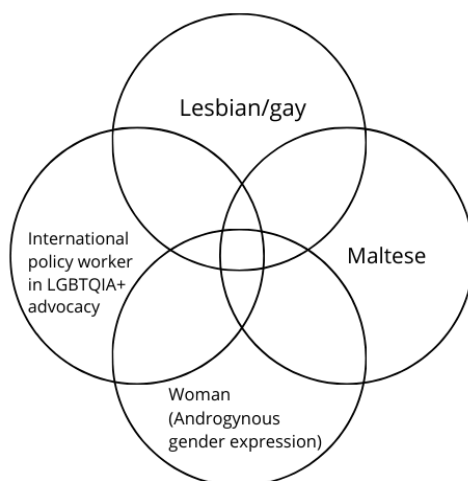
## Yan



Yan (they/them) is a French student who volunteers part-time at the Centre LGBTQI+ in Paris. Yan identifies as non binary but has been going through an identity crisis over the past few months, which led them to experiment with the masculine pronouns for a while. As an AFAB individual, Yan uses the label "lesbian" to refer to their sexuality for clarity reasons

until their gender identity becomes clear to them. Their queer friendship group in their sociology cohort at university is a support system that Yan is very grateful for, as being a part of a group of like-minded individuals makes it easier to navigate their queerness and gender identity.

## Gabi

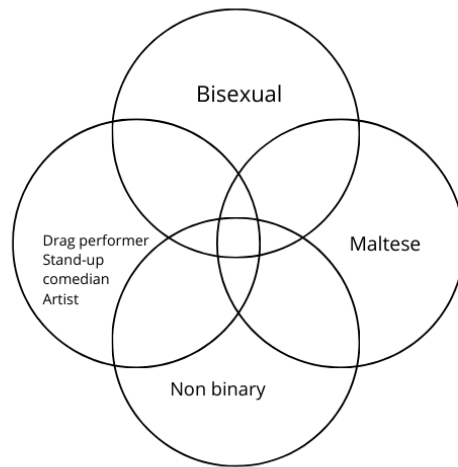


Former coordinator of MGRM and co-chair of the executive board of ILGA Europe (International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association), Gabi (she/her) currently works for the SOGIGESC Unit at the Human Rights Directorate (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Unit). In an online interview for the Rosa Kwir<sup>6</sup> project, Gabi defined her sexuality and gender identity as follows: “I use the terms lesbian or gay person to identify my sexual orientation. My gender expression is rather masculine or androgynous which is somewhat self-evident I would think.” (Rosa Kwir, 2021)

---

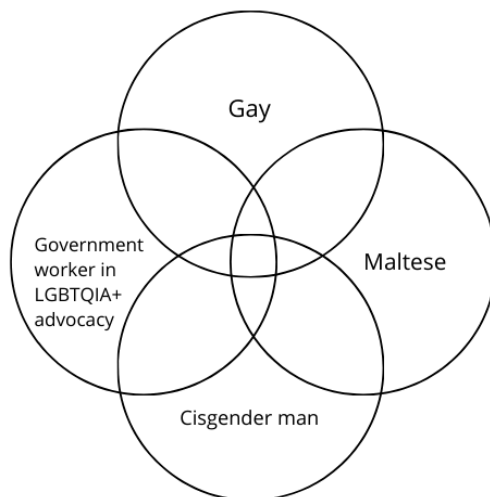
<sup>6</sup> Started in 2021, Rosa Kwir is an archive focused on alternative masculinity, with stories of trans men, non-binary, and LBQI masculine-presenting individuals in Malta. The collection includes donated objects, photography, audio-visuals, and written materials. (Rosa Kwir, 2021)

## Crush Velvet



Crush Velvet (she/they) is a member of the Maltese drag family Haus of Velvet. Performance arts have been part of her life since childhood, and they are currently present on the Maltese stand-up comedy scene as well as the drag scene. She performs in bars, cafes, night-clubs and festivals across the island and told me about the joy that stems from belonging in a queer drag family.

## Clayton



Former president of Allied Rainbow Communities and now LGBTQIA+ advocate at the Human Rights Directorate in Malta, Clayton (he/him) started off as a grassroots activist and built his way up until entering political advocacy with the Maltese government. Clayton told me about the joyful aspects of organising Europride 2023, as well as the queer joy that stems from raising his six-year-old son with his husband.

## LGBTI+ Gozo

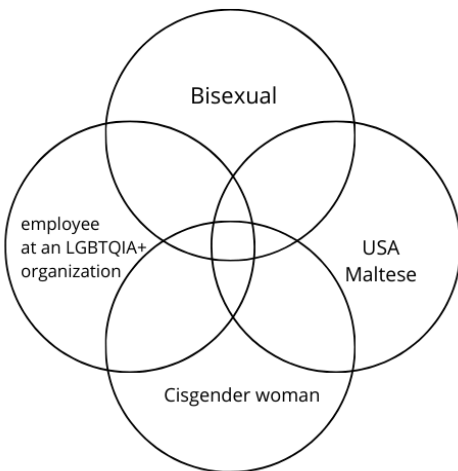
executive members



The participants of my focus group were six members of the executive team of LGBTI+ Gozo, and for the sake of information I also created more detailed diagrams for four of them below.

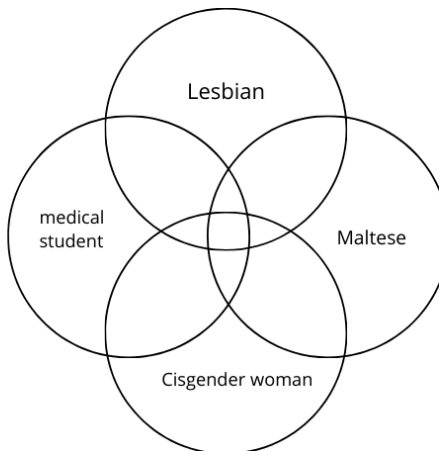
### Cat

LGBTI+ Gozo executive member



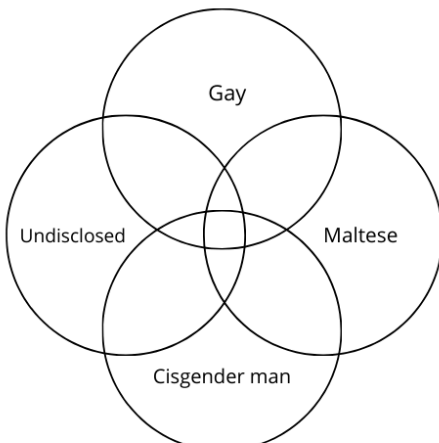
### Antonella

LGBTI+ Gozo executive member



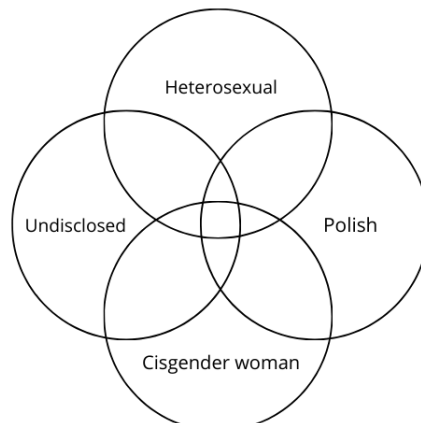
### Daniele

LGBTI+ Gozo executive member



### Luiza

LGBTI+ Gozo executive member



This executive team became a group of friends through their activism, and they collectively explained to me how a profound sense of belonging and family developed really quickly between them. We talked about queer joy stemming from community, social events and organising the Gozo Pride each year.

## Structure of this chapter

These semi-structured interviews were thought out according to an IPA design (Smith et al., 2009, p.43), which seemed to be the most appropriate format due to the exploratory nature and openness of my research questions:

Salmon (2002) has pointed out that there can be a problem with these very open kinds of research questions: how do we know when we have answered them? Thus, you may find it useful to identify a series of objectives, steps which, once achieved, will allow you to show that your question has been answered. For example, 'Describe the key features of anger as it is understood by persons seeking help from this service' might be one useful objective for assessing the outcome, and containing the scope, of a project which aims to 'Explore the meaning of anger for men who are receiving anger management counselling'.

In this perspective, while the purpose of these interviews was to describe the key features of joy, hope and positive emotions in the scope of youth activism for LGBTQIA+ rights, I knew the nuances of the themes required tailor-made questions based on the stories of each participant. In the spirit of phenomenology, I prioritised questions related to the participants' personal experiences with their own queerness and with their work, asking follow-up questions about how these experiences felt and how these impacted them. After collecting the data I coded each interview using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this coding tree that emerged from the data, the numbers in parenthesis correspond to the number of occurrences of each pattern across the full data set:

- Sources of joy
  - Representation and celebration (29)
  - Support system, sense of belonging and guidance (20)
  - Self-acceptance and self-determination (12)
  - Sense of safety (10)
  - Using spite as a fuel (10)
  - Learning and exploration (7)
- Community building
  - Relating to other communities (15)
  - Roles of the LGBTQIA+ community (13)
  - Creating a community (12)



- Tensions and conflicts within the community (9)
- Collective resilience and resistance (9)
- Educational purpose
  - Informal education (20)
  - Tools and approaches used in their work (16)
  - Sense of hope in their work (12)
  - Non-formal education (10)
  - Intersectional dimension of their work (7)
  - Sense of joy in their work (6)
  - Empathy and reciprocity (3)

I have designed this chapter as a structured answer to my research question, dividing it in two parts in an attempt to respond to the two sub-questions. Each part provides an argued answer that emerged from the participants' stories. My task was to organise the different extracts in a way that reflects the thematic analysis I implemented through coding. The next section titled Discussion of results will be dedicated to linking some viewpoints expressed by the participants to precise points of my literature review and theoretical framework.

## Can joy and hope be instruments for an intersectional approach in queer activism ?

Some participants described how joyful events such as Pride marches, workshops and queer parties create social links between queer people of all backgrounds. Beyond creating spaces to socialise for queer people, these events are where activist actions take place in different ways. Juliette is doing her internship at La Bulle - Maison des solidarités LGBTQIA+<sup>7</sup> in Paris. Juliette's internship is supervised by Ardhis<sup>8</sup>, a non-profit organisation which aims to secure recognition of the residence and asylum rights of foreign LGBTQIA+ people. La Bulle is a community-based project, managed by seven NGOs including Ardhis, and offers different services related to health, social welfare, psychological and legal assistance. Juliette's work consists of providing free therapy sessions and organising weekly workshops around cooking, dancing, painting and more depending on the participants' interests. Juliette described the monthly march organised by La Bulle as a source of joy and hope for the participants. On this occasion, asylum seekers from different cultural backgrounds and life circumstances gather around one same goal, celebrating their queerness: "The fact that it's a Pride march, it also communicates that they can claim their rights. And they're happy to show that in France, there's people from other countries who

---

<sup>7</sup> See [présentation générale – la bulle – maison des solidarités lgbtqi+ \(la-bulle.net\)](https://la-bulle.net)

<sup>8</sup> Association pour la reconnaissance des droits des personnes homosexuelles et trans à l'immigration et au séjour - Association for the recognition of the immigration and residence rights of homosexual and trans people.

don't share the same culture and who are also LGBT.” Juliette says this recurring event is highly awaited by the participants and she witnesses it gives them strength to move forward.

Developing social links is key to creating an intersectional approach in activism. Alex recalls MGRM's participation in a Human Library project in a post-secondary school. The reciprocal dynamic of the project allowed the speakers and the participants to learn from each other as well as discover a diversity of life circumstances experienced by people from different social, cultural, economic, religious, sexual, neurostructural backgrounds:

So there's like, trans people, same sex couples, people with ADHD, everything to spread awareness, you know? And you see people with ADHD, they go to the ADHD side. Then if they're ADHD and queer, they go to both of us. But I feel that, 15-16 year olds and up, they find it hard. And especially to tell their parents even... Trans people coming from Muslim backgrounds, for example, or coming from Eastern Europe. In fact, it's a new reality that we have to learn. Because I am not equipped to talk to a Muslim family, for example, practising Muslim, I have zero skills on that. I know that I don't know. So yes, education goes both ways.

Some participants expressed that placing joy at the centre of their activism is what pushes them forward and helps them work more efficiently. Similarly to La Bulle, the Centre LGBTQI+ of Paris<sup>9</sup> is a community space advocating for equal rights and against discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The Centre partners with 90 LGBT organisations across Paris and France, and provides different services for queer and questioning individuals from all backgrounds. When they started volunteering at the Centre in the reception area, Yan was happy to discover that joy was an important part within the volunteers training:

I think queer joy is really central to us. I mean, we volunteer here to provide support, but this support exists to aim for joy. In our reception training it was emphasised that we're not here to suffer, you know? I mean, we already have a tendency to take in all the pain of the world, and think we have to help others since we are happy in our own lives. We discuss it a lot with the other volunteers, so we try to also focus on our own happiness and self-care.

In this context, joy is used as a tool to create connections between the volunteers and the people coming to the centre for support. Both La Bulle and the Centre LGBTQI+ operate on an intersectional model, welcoming queer people and employing volunteers and health professionals from different countries and socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, both

---

<sup>9</sup> [centrelgbtparis.org](http://centrelgbtparis.org)

these spaces foster a climate of joy and hope to bring together facilitators and beneficiaries in their initiatives to support the international queer communities across Paris.

The executive members of LGBTI+ Gozo expressed that meeting people from different backgrounds who all experienced similar struggles was a catalyst for joy (see extract in **bold** below) and collective resilience. Created in 2015 and to this day the only queer organisation on Malta's sister island, LGBTI+ Gozo aims to provide "a safe space for queer Gozitans to express their pride, through a number of social events, awareness campaigns and educational programs." (LGBTI+ Gozo, 2024)<sup>10</sup>. When discussing the theme of queer joy in our focus group, the participants expressed how going through hardships planted a seed for empathy and joy:

3: I think when I started to travel, I realised that it's so easy for us to connect and get together and start to network because we understand kind of the gist of life? Like we try to be more open minded, we try to accept, we accept everyone, we accept ourselves. We are living by, we try to live by certain... How do they say? Standards, what we represent as well, so it is easier for us to connect on so many different levels with other people.

4: because we all have one thing in common.

3: Yes.

4: We're all different, but we all have the most important thing.

**3: That's pretty much, like we said, like defining the queer joy. Yes, all that we have been through.**

**4: Because we can understand each other and-**

3: Yes.

4: On many different levels.

Cat: On a deeper level, on a deeper level of being, of being othered by other people. And when you've lived that experience, I think you're always kind of aware of "am I the other in this situation?" But then when you find an LGBT community, You realise that "OK, I can be in other. I can be different, but I can also be part of something. I can be part of something bigger and I can be part of something that is a family outside of my blood family", you know.

Sean, youth activist at YPB, told me how he uses his extrovert nature and his cis-white male privilege as a lever effect for an intersectional approach to his activism. He recalls the protest for Andrea Prudente in 2022:

This American woman was going to die and the government would not give her an abortion. With YPB we all went to protest and I asked a bunch of my male friends "Hey, guys, come! Everyone should come. It's for everybody!" And what happened was, a lot of men were approaching us, were approaching ME, the one of TWO men

---

<sup>10</sup> [lgbtigozo.com](http://lgbtigozo.com)

in this big group of protesters. And they're like "why are YOU here? It doesn't affect you!" I'm like "Yes, it does! Because we all have women in our lives this could affect, and if it's not affecting me personally, I want to help other people who would be affected by this.

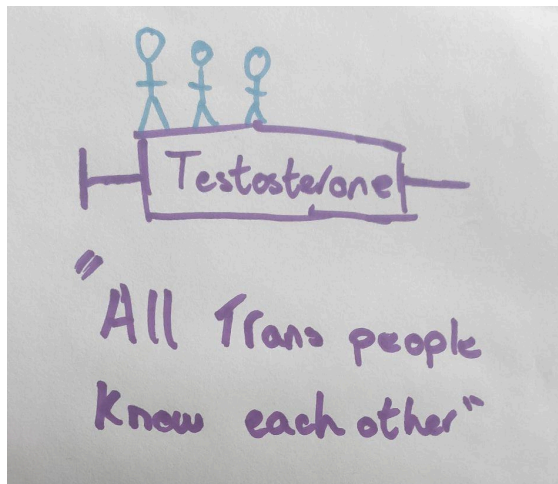
Nicknamed "protest guy" by coworkers who would spot him on pictures of newspaper articles, Sean explains how he takes advantage of it when discussing political issues with clients at the bar where he works.

The amount of times they recognize me from these articles, and ask me my stance on things, and I get to educate them a bit more. And it's lovely to have these conversations that don't escalate, because I feel that a lot of older men have very black and white views on activism. When they see a woman protesting, they think, "Oh, these women are trying to take away our rights". I'm like, "No! That's not what's happening! They're trying to get their own rights!" I feel these men are finally, slowly coming around when they see other men talking about it. I'm not saying men should mansplain it! Not at all. But they have this, I guess, very brainwashed view of automatically hating women sometimes? And they won't listen to a woman talk about their own issues. Because they feel they're being attacked in the public eye. So yes, I feel having more men talk about it and being in support of women is really helpful in getting people to think more critically.

In an approach similar to French theorists advocating for a convergence of struggles, Sean calls for an activism based on reciprocity between different communities:

And that's my whole mentality with my activism is I'm not... I'm never doing it for me, because I know if I need his help, if my community needed help, I would expect other people to protest in favour of mine. So why shouldn't I do it first, you know?

YPB asked me to organise a talk and share my early findings, so on June 6th I presented my research project and held a workshop at Maori in Valletta. At the end of the workshop I invited everyone present to take part in a queer joy mapping exercise, with freedom to write and draw whatever queer joy means to them. The participants chose to work individually, creating a patchwork of different elements next to each other. The final result was meaningful as it showed a series of queer joy sparks as participants doodled what came to their mind in a sort of stream of consciousness.



This contribution was made by a trans man, he explained that he sees solidarity in the fact that he and his friends take turns in administering testosterone shots to each other. The sentence at the bottom of the syringe is a saying among the trans community and another expression of the mutual support between transgender individuals in Malta. The second biggest source of joy emerging from the coding was “Support system, sense of belonging and guidance”. In the interviews, participants expressed a sense of wellbeing, relief and happiness when referring to their friends or chosen family. Government official and LGBTQIA+ advocate, Clayton talks about Pride as a space to reinforce this atmosphere of mutual support among the queer community:

It is that time where we need to be reminded of where we've come from, the struggles we've had to overcome and the challenges. And to remind others that we exist, because ultimately it's also a show. We have to remember that there will always be people in the closet or families who are not accepting. But knowing that Pride exists is a way to show that we are here for those who cannot yet march. But we will be welcoming you when the time is right. Or that there are people who will support you. There are people who will give you the therapy, or the support you need. So I think that's why it's very important.

In France, I have observed an intersectional Pride celebration in June in La Courneuve, in the outskirts of Paris. In their Call to Demonstrate for the 2024 edition, the organisation of the Pride des Banlieues (Outskirts Pride) sets this year's march within the French political context:

The fight against the far right cannot be reduced to a universal struggle; we must recognise the multiple and interconnected realities of oppression. We refuse to see our struggles instrumentalised to serve interests that betray us. We are the ethnic minorities, the trans people, the migrants, the feminists, the gays and lesbians, the poor. All those targeted by the far right as scapegoats to mask the real scourges of

our society: racism, patriarchy and precarity. We are calling for resistance, mobilisation and solidarity.<sup>11</sup>



*Source: La Pride des Banlieues' Instagram story on June 22, 2024*

At the end of the march, the organisers called for everyone to lay on the ground for a minute of silence to honour the victims of police violence. At the end of this die-in, we all stood up to see this installation at the head of the parade: three people disguised as death-row convicts were tied up under the letters RN<sup>12</sup>, each carrying the motive for their sentence around their necks (LGBTQI, immigrant, Muslim). This photo was shared on the organisation's social media with the caption "Facism kills", placing this year's Pride des Banlieues under the umbrella of an intersectional fight against systemic oppression.

---

<sup>11</sup> [Nos Revendications \(pridedesbanlieues.fr\)](https://pridedesbanlieues.fr)

<sup>12</sup> Rassemblement National, or National Rally, the French far-right political party, scored its highest percentage in history at the European Elections of 2024 with 31,37% ([source](#)).



I took both these photos during the march, to illustrate the convergence of struggles as it was orchestrated by the participants. On the left, a Palestinian flag is being held next to a transgender flag. On the right, the non-binary flag shows an anarchist A in its centre, which can be interpreted in different ways: as a rejection of the social hierarchy behind the gender binary, or as a genderpunk claim, where being an anarchist affects one's gender<sup>13</sup>. This flag stands in front of an LGBTQIA+ flag that says "VOTONS" ("LET'S VOTE") referring to the legislative elections happening eight days after the march.

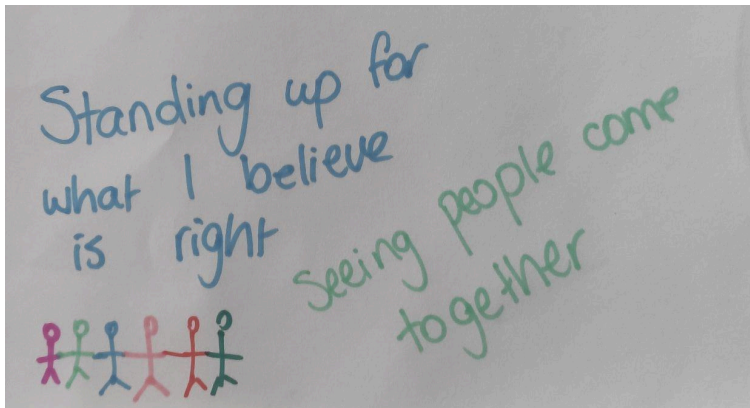
---

<sup>13</sup> [Anarchogender - LGBTQIA+ Wiki](#)



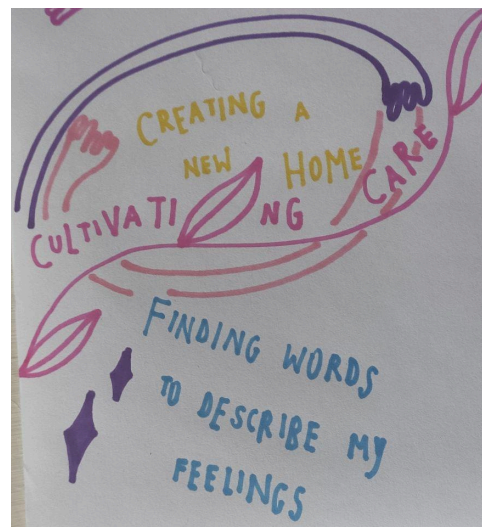
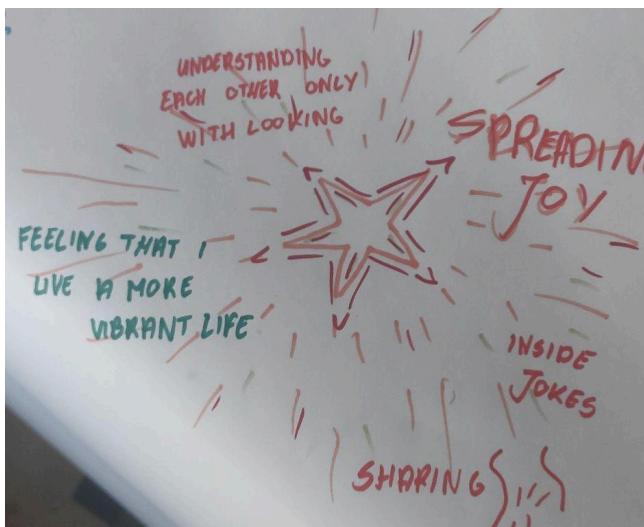
What tools & approaches do youth activists, youth workers, educators and performers use for community building in this joyful revolution ?

Building a community of resistance around joy



This contribution to the queer mapping exercise reminded me of Gabi's interview, when at some point she described her wedding celebration as an experience of queer joy :

And of course then my own wedding, marriage to my wife, that was another important moment of queer joy for me. Every time I go to a wedding between a same-sex couple, it's just a... You know, because for many years we used to go to weddings and think "this can never happen for me !". So every time it does happen, it's like, a reliving of this moment. Of all the effort that went into making that kind of union possible for everyone.





These contributions came from two different people but express similar ideas. Both state that queer joy comes from finding belonging in a community (“cultivating care”, “understanding each other only with looking”, “inside jokes”, “creating a new home”) while exploring one’s identity (“finding words to describe my feelings”, “feeling that I live a more vibrant life”). It reminded me of this interaction with LGBTI+ Gozo’s members about finding their place in a stigmatised minority and living a more vibrant life thanks to it:

Daniele: And that kind of, it’s a feeling which is true for everyone in the community. It’s like, why would we put ourselves in the minority?

Luiza: Exactly, exactly. No one would do it.

Antonella: To be fair, now I’d say, like I’d still choose to be gay ! \*laughs\* No, no but... Oh my God, because I really love the community actually. And I love who it made me, as in like, I wouldn’t be the same person AT ALL if I wasn’t queer, I think. Because it really... You learn more about yourself and stuff like that.

Drag performers often have a drag family, a community where they can receive guidance from their mentors (drag parents) and take care of their mentees (drag children). As a member of the Haus of Velvet, Crush Velvet told me the story of meeting her drag daughter:

When we met she was about 17, which in my head was a baby. And she was interested in doing drag, but she is trans feminine, so, didn’t have a lot of resources and I really just instantly wanted to take her under my wing. She was like “can I be your drag daughter?” I was like, “okay!” And then we got around to it, and we do make up together. And you know, we do little little dance workshops. She runs her ideas by me. She is not technically a member of the Haus of Velvet yet because she is just a baby, but I am very much just a stage mom, I’m like, “yes, baby! today Tigullio, tomorrow the world!”

According to Crush Velvet, having the support of her drag family was key in building their drag career. I asked them what tool they use within Haus of Velvet to foster community-building and positivity, to which they replied:

I would say the main tool is this idea of being spitefully happy. As someone who’s struggled a lot with suicidal ideations and mental health, I do think that it is a good approach to say “I’m going to live my life in spite of what people want me to do. If people want to be dead I am going to live specifically because they want me dead.” But that cannot exist from pure anger. It’s a very short-term solution if you base that in anger. I think the spitefulness needs to come from “I will make myself as happy as possible because they don’t want me to be happy. I will. Fuel myself. With joy.

The subcode “Using spite as a fuel” appeared only in testimonies of grassroots workers and is exemplified in this segment from LGBTI+ Gozo’s interview:

L: What emotions or feelings do you associate with your activism?

Antonella: \*laughs\* A roller coaster!

Daniele: A lot!

Antonella: Screaming, crying, but laughing. I don't know. It's it's. For me, it's everything. I felt depressed. I felt angry. I felt frustrated. I felt... Helpless like. But then I also felt amazing and, you know, happy and loved and -

Daniele: Yeah. And like powerful as well.

In the testimonials of French-speaking participants, spite and negative emotions appeared in parts of Charlie’s interview, when discussing the weariness of pursuing social change:

Charlie: I think that if we don't have activists it's just... nothing moves. People can be reformists as much as they want, the changes will require way too much energy for it to always be made under the form of what we call "the Belgian compromise" in our country. The compromise that you come to and no one's happy about it. I'm sick of Belgian compromises. I want actual change, and it just takes too much energy to have too little change, and it's taking too much time and people don't have time! People are dying from queerphobia. A lot of people are directly dying from it, and that makes the news most of the time. But what doesn't make the news is those who indirectly die from it. From uneducated medical personnel, from poverty, from isolation, untreated mental health issues, and these people die, and they do not have time for reform! So now is the time for revolution and only activism can bring that.

## Storytelling and artistic workshops

Marthese recalls a queer-mapping activity she led during one of the youth writing weekends which took place in a religious retreat space.

You know, there's a map with a lot of anecdotes and stories, a normal world map. I forgot what it's called<sup>14</sup>. But it's for example "here I had my 1st kiss, despite my country being very oppressive" for example. It's a map like that, and we tried to do the same, with just a drawing of Malta. So either places that were common knowledge, for example, queer bars and so on. And we tried to pin them on the map. So it was about taking up space, which... In that space there were lots of photos of nuns and religious people on the wall. And the participants, they gave them names and backstories! So it was using a storytelling method to take that space basically. It was very funny!

I asked Marthese about the use of storytelling as an educational tool:

---

<sup>14</sup> After our interview I looked it up and found this webpage: [queeringthemap.com](http://queeringthemap.com)

You can speak about harder topics through stories, because for example you can take the perspective of a character. It doesn't have to be something personal, you can make it non-fiction. We've even used collages for example. You can use different media to make it more fun. You can make it more palatable. So even if you were speaking of like discrimination or assault or something like that, you can use stories. You can do so much through stories. I'm not a believer of sitting down and explaining something to someone, they need to... It's experiential learning. They need to experience it themselves. And I think storytelling is a beautiful way to do it.

Marthese gave me an example of storytelling in practice, in a Tale and Tell workshop she facilitated in 2019:

I found one exercise, it's like community building through poetry. First, they start to write a personal poem and then they get into a small group. They voted on a specific topic prior. And then they choose a line each, and somehow they have a new poem right there. It's a good team building exercise but they always comment "we didn't think it would work, but it worked!".

Juliette shared her experience of co-leading artistic workshops with Ardhis at La Bulle:

So on Wednesdays we do workshops with the people seeking asylum. We have cooking, drawing, plastic arts, board games, card games, yoga, and dance workshops. These aim to create social links, because the participants are often isolated, they have no papers, no money, they come to a country where they don't know anyone, sometimes not even the language. Some do speak English, so the workshops help build bridges and bring people together by showing that others share their experiences and that there is hope. They're often joyful moments filled with laughter, and though they can get crowded, they're always very positive. People often thank us for a good time. The goal is to create joyful connections.

The non-formal education methods explained in these testimonies have positive impacts on the participants, and Marthese states that these methods can prove to be more efficient than formal education in certain contexts:

Because formal education, I mean, there's still a way to go and there's... There's a lot that it tries to do. And I'm not sure if it works. But non-formal education, I've seen it! Even with some of the people that are involved in Kitba Queer, they started to go on a lot of international mobility. And it really built their character, it really builds them up.

## Performing arts and entertainment

When asked about what emotions they associate with their performing career, drag icon Crush Velvet replied:

Honestly, I do think the main one is frankly joy, in the sense of, even the core of all of my performances is “what am I in the mood for today?” There have been very few performances where I said “I don't want to be performing what I am performing”. I don't think there's been any. Even if I wasn't necessarily excelling at it, I was always happy with what I was creating. It's just about “what do I want to do?” “What is gonna entertain me?” “What do I think is funny?” “What do I think is cunt<sup>15</sup>?” “What do I think is going to be entertaining for people?”.

Crush Velvet explained that in her opinion, performing arts are tightly linked to activism:

There's going to be a pro Palestine stand-up comedy show on the 7th of June. That's just activism in itself, because the 7th is actually a public holiday due to riots that Malta had for our own rights. So it's a very pro Palestinian statement that they're making, from the comedy scene. And I think the existence of drag alone is activism, in the sense of like, just by existing I normalise the concept of it, which is still an alienated and quite maligned concept nowadays. So I just think like, yes, there are opportunities for direct and explicit activism, but there are also MANY opportunities for implicit activism. Just sometimes existing is activism.

When asked if they think drag can bring change in Maltese society regarding queer issues, the performer replied:

I do! I do in the sense of like, I do think that drag is a good way of... It's a contentious subject nowadays for sure, but It's hard not to be entertained by a performer whose sole job is to be entertaining. Drag-queens, I think, just exude joy in the sense of... Our sheer existence needs to be joyful, and interesting, and engaging. So yeah, I do think that drag can normalise things. And also, I think Maltese culture is more aligned to accept drag than a lot of people think we are? Because most people look at “oh we have this many Catholics, we have this, we have that, so of course we wouldn't be accepting of drag queens!” when in actuality the biggest theatrical medium we have is panto, where there's a giant cross-dresser! And that's put in a VERY heterosexual context. I want to be clear : panto is a very heterosexual instance of cross-dressing. However, you let your children around them, the dames are beloved as childhood figures. So I do think that Maltese society is more primed to love drag queens than people give us credit for!

---

<sup>15</sup> Not derogatory. Similarly to “throwing shade” or “slay”, this term comes from AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and got associated with drag culture through ballroom, which became mainstream as queer culture got mediatised. In the drag world and in internet vernacular, to be “serving cunt” is to be fierce, sassy and confident. ([theconversation.com](http://theconversation.com)).

Clayton shared his experience as a co-organizer of Europride 2023. The Pride Village set in Valletta offered 10 days of entertainment through a variety of events aiming at increasing awareness around queer issues:

We had daily talks about different topics: abortion, the elderly, trans rights... So these were happening throughout the 10 day conference and in fact that was also a way to reach out and improve education besides that, also culturally, through the cinema nights and the theatre program itself.

According to him, the conferences, workshops, film screenings and theatre plays achieved an informal educational goal:

They were a way to educate the public because it wasn't just fun theatre or just drag shows, it was also about, there was one in particular for example about the experience of being Muslim gay and in Europe for example. So it was showing their experience. So all these events helped to increase awareness and sensitivity.

When asked about the impacts of Europride 2023 on Maltese mentalities around queerness, Clayton replied:

In general, I think it did satisfy a lot of the curiosity and the ambiguity of what Europride is about. And that it's not all about sex and orgies in the end, and that there is much more to it, it's much more diverse than... and it portrayed what a diverse community, the LGBTIQ community is.

## Sexual health prevention

Manu.e recalls their experience of travelling to San Francisco with a friend in 2019 to meet the local community of Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a queer international movement founded in 1979 which “take vows to Promulgate Universal Joy and Expiate Stigmatic Guilt”<sup>16</sup>. Functioning as an Order of queer and trans nuns, the Sisters aim to fight for AIDS and STDs prevention through community service, supporting marginalised individuals, and promoting human rights, diversity, and spiritual enlightenment (ibid). Manu.e and their friend, a member of the French branch, flew over for the 40th anniversary of the movement:

It was great! We did all sorts of things with the Sisters, and I was welcome although I wasn't part of the movement. I could sign up, not everywhere, but in general I could sign up and we did some crazy stuff. In fact, the Sisters are there for prevention. At first it was AIDS prevention, now it's prevention for all the STIs that exist, so they're also here to, how should I put it? They are here to talk to people, because they mainly come to drag clubs, bars, nightclubs, backrooms and so on. They hand out

---

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.thesisters.org/joy>

lube, condoms, and water because people take lots of drugs. They hand out latex gloves, they talk about safe sex.

While they are now an international non-profit organisation, the Sisters started off as a grassroots initiative: on Easter weekend of 1979, three gay men marched in the streets of San Francisco onto its nude beach wearing Roman Catholic clothing, as a protest against the “conformist atmosphere”<sup>17</sup> and “assimilative politics guiding the gay rights movement”<sup>18</sup>. A few other public appearances gathered sufficient attention for new members to join and within a few months an Order was formed. The Sisters developed roots in the queer community of San Francisco, using a bottom-up approach (Collins, 2019) to grow branches and provide healthcare and community service from San Francisco to the rest of the world.

## Mental health counselling

Manu.e told me about the counselling aspect of their mission as a volunteer at the LGBTQI+ Centre:

Sometimes we sit down, we spend an hour with someone... Then depending on the issue we have people who are trained for that, we have PsyGay which is a therapists association and where we know, well if you go to PsyGay you know that your therapist is a queer person so that is also appreciable. But it can be hard, you know. We meet asylum seekers who have tragic, dramatic experiences. We also have minors. But we also have people who are just questioning.

Manu.e recalls the story of a 55-year-old mother who came to the Centre questioning her gender identity:

After talking to her for a long time, she understood that she was non-binary. But it's also the problem of having no one to talk about it with and to validate it. And she said to me, "But I've built my life, I'm straight, I've got a husband. And I love my husband and I love my children!" And I said "It's OK, you can be non-binary and it doesn't have to question your everyday life, or your life as a couple or whatever! And I imagine that there are straight non-binary people!"

Juliette holds therapy sessions for asylum seekers alongside her internship supervisor (a licensed therapist at Ardhis) at La Bulle on Thursdays:

The patients come to therapy with a request, a certain distress, depressive thoughts or a lack of meaning, or a lot of anger sometimes. If we feel that we can take care of it and the patient doesn't need medication, we can do the sessions ourselves. We can also refer them to psychiatric services, and when we do that it's often to facilities that specialise in LGBT issues, so it's reassuring to know that.

---

<sup>17</sup> [sistory \(thesisters.org\)](http://sistory(thesisters.org))

<sup>18</sup> <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/sisters-of-perpetual-indulgence>

## Protesting

The activists of YPB are present at every protest related to women and minorities' rights, and Sean told me he views protesting as an educational process in itself:

I feel that activists are by nature educators. They educate people in a more, not aggressive way I guess, activists aren't aggressive. I guess in a more "in your face" way on societal issues. Where a lot of people might just downplay things and kind of sweep it under the rug, activists are there chanting, and being a full body presence of the community that are in favour or against certain topics. And I feel that without protests... In America, without protests, women wouldn't have the right to vote. Black people wouldn't have the right to vote. So I feel that protests are really important, to educate people about protests, and how to protest safely. To be an activist is a part of what makes us a citizen in the city we're living in. The country we're living in.

## Normalising queer issues

Gabi led the COPE teacher training in January 2022 for a large group of educators, focusing on gender issues and incorporating changes to the syllabus. She recalls her experience with teacher training in primary schools and kindergarten:

I always tried to give practical examples. So I'd explain that in any school, you can have children who have parents who are same sex couples for example. So, you know, if they happen to be in kindergarten, if you're talking about families, you have to talk about all families. You can't just talk about one kind of family. You have to make sure that you educate children about the whole reality, not just the parts of it that you agree with. And so long as it's done, and as we said in an age appropriate way - you're not talking about sex between you know, same-sex couples when they're 4 or 5 years old. You're just talking about different kinds of families. So it's trying to give these practical examples that help teachers understand where and how to integrate LGBTI identities in the classroom. You know, and even simple things : if a boy wants to dress up as a girl or if a girl wants to play football with boys, you know, these kinds of practical things.

Gabi explains that normalising queerness in formal education at school creates a bridge towards educating adults around queer issues: "In general, teachers tend to understand. And even parents, because I also used to give training for parents through the Institute for Education. So I think even parents understand why sometimes it is necessary."

As a junior therapist for queer refugees, Juliette also pursues a goal of normalising queerness in her patients' self-perceptions:

When people come to us, they often say when talking about straight people, "normal people". So it's a lot of trying to rephrase and ask: "What do you mean by normal people? Do you think you're not normal?" We really look at this question of the normal and the pathological, and we feel that the patients are happy to leave with... Less guilt. By being aware that they can be completely normal and they're not crazy. Or that they're not inferior to people who are heterosexual. I feel they leave feeling more confident, less guilty, lighter.

Yan recalls the evolution of their relationship with a straight friend, who started to learn about the LGBTQIA+ community through her friendship with Yan until normalising the notion of queerness in her own worldviews:

She's never felt uncomfortable around me, because she's never seen me as different, and I think it's made a change in the way she perceives the community. For example, sometimes she comes to the Centre when we have parties, and she's much more at ease with it, whereas before she was like "do I really belong there? or is this space not for me?" And then thinking, "Well, it's Yan's world, actually". And now, when she meets other people who are queer, it's the same instinctive reaction of "Well, it's normal, and I don't need to question it."

Yan adds that the simple fact of nurturing this friendship and letting this friend into their world sufficed for her to become more open-minded, without Yan needing to advocate for the cause: "It was never a matter of talking about it. I think she educated herself on her own. But personally I really felt a shift in her position."

I asked Sean what changes he thinks education can bring regarding queer issues:

I think at the moment, everyone seems just so proud to be out and be happy to be queer, that introducing it in education will kind of make it mundane. And that's what I'm hoping it becomes! I'm hoping being queer will just be as mundane as being straight. Like, no would have to come out. That's what I'm hoping for with education. Where if a four year old is exposed to queerness, then as they grow older, they're like "yeah, of course. Why do I care if you're gay or straight? It's normal. Whatever you are." That's what I want."

I asked the same question to the executive team of LGBTI+ Gozo, and they also talked about the importance of normalising queer issues in everyday life, in children's education as well as the health sector:

Daniele: I think changing the mentality of people, even if it's just one person, because... Ultimately, when it comes to how people are treated and the services we provide, for example, I work in the health industry and of course we get people from a



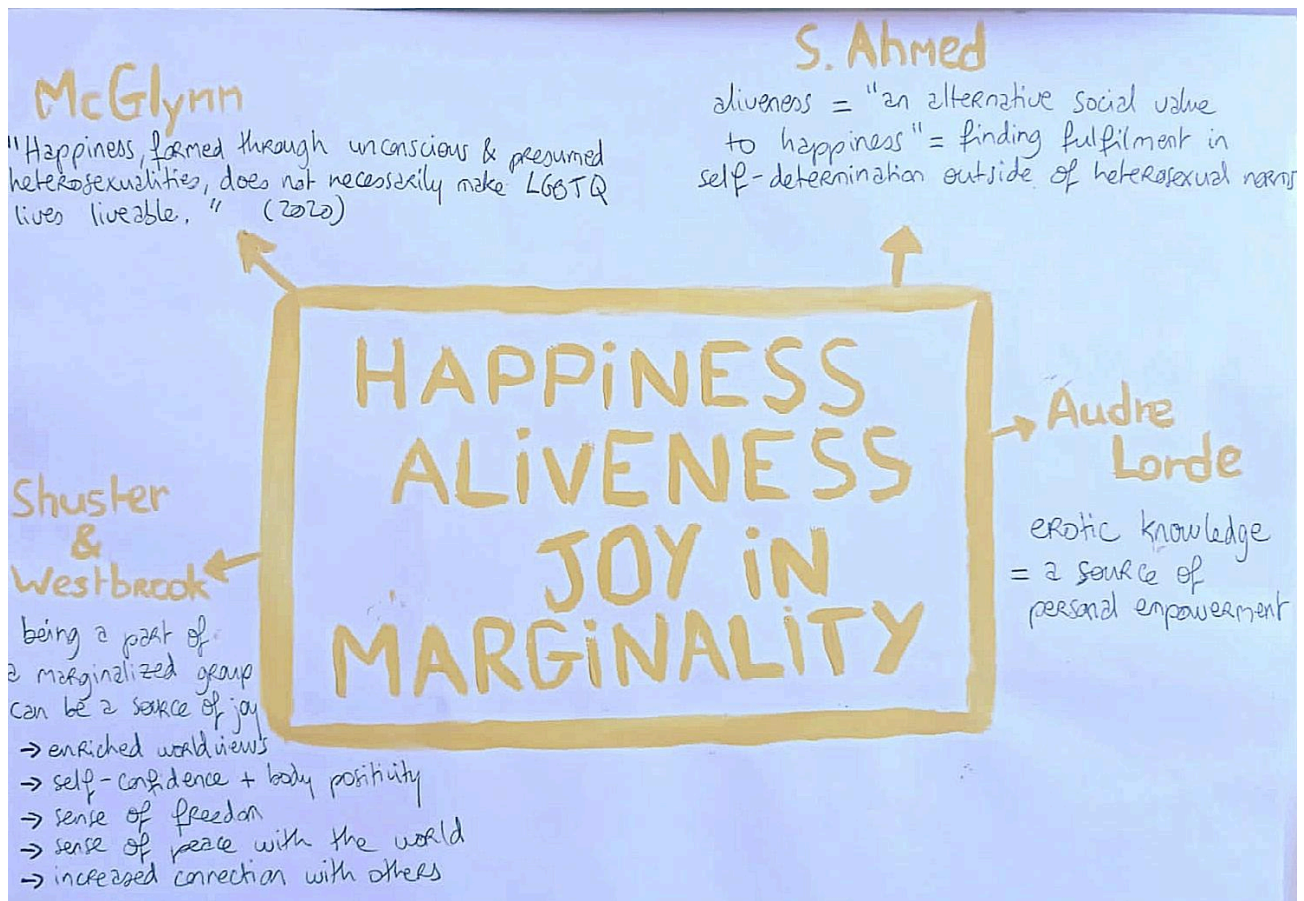
variety of different religions, sexual orientations, and so on. And the more we normalise queer issues and the more we break the stigma, the more equally and fairly treated everyone can be in society. Even, you know, being seen on television. I've had a colleague who told me, like "oh, my son saw the Pride thing on television," and he asked her "mom, am I gonna be gay when I grow up?" She's like "no, you know, some people are queer, some people are not" and it's easy to understand. And he's like, "OK!" so, you know, it's just like these little things. I think that's powerful.

Luiza: Yeah, I think the same. From my perspective, I think that when people see that a queer person is normal - I mean NORMAL! And has the same problems as EVERYONE, you know, like they have the same problems as I have! Sometimes they have a problem with their body that a lot of girls have, even hetero or not hetero. So then they understand that being queer is JUST being queer! it's just that they sleep with different people! And I think that this is what people need to understand, you know, that being queer is normal. And another thing is, that's not your fucking business!

## Discussion of results

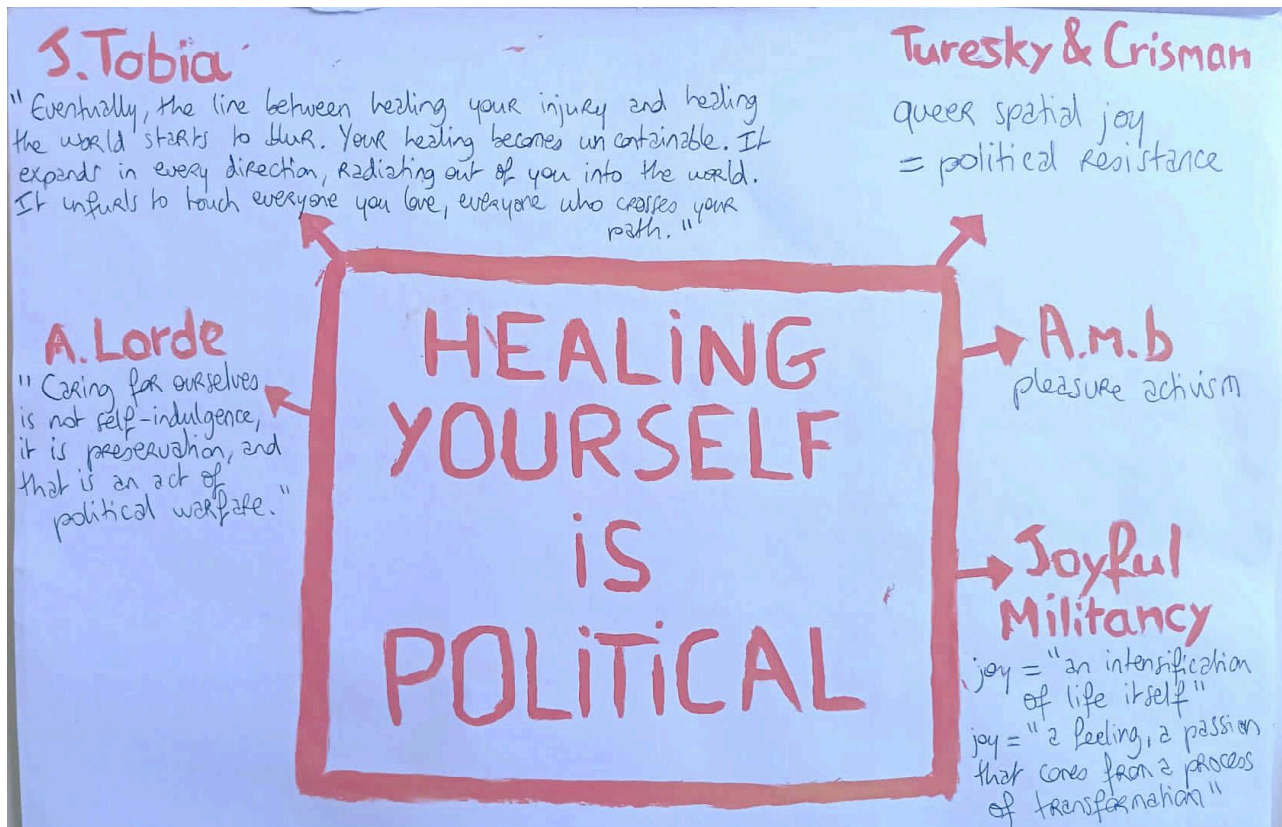
### Queer joy is political, here is the evidence

I created three posters to present parts from my literature review and theoretical framework at the workshop in Maori. I will now refer to these and connect some elements to the findings.



In the focus group with LGBTI+ Gozo, Antonella said "To be fair, I would still choose to be gay!", meaning that if sexual orientation was a choice (which, needless to precise, it is not), she would still choose to be a lesbian despite the complications her queerness could bring to her life. She values her queerness as a key part of her being, since understanding her homosexuality was necessary for her to fully understand herself. Her testimony exemplifies a joyful aspect that comes from contingency (Ahmed, 2006) and escaping the grid of heterosexual lines (Kojima, 2009). In a similar vein to Shuster and Westbrook's (2023) participants who found their joy within being a part of a marginalised community, learning about her lesbianism made her life more vibrant and allowed her to create friendships with other queer people from Malta and abroad. Likewise, Manu.e's experience of personal fulfilment through meeting the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in Chicago is another example of finding joy in marginality. The Sisters' positionality as an alternative to the catholic convents hierarchy, recreating a community around a satirical approach to religious imagery and a celebration of queerness, can be perceived as a claim for aliveness (Ahmed, 2010). Indeed, the Sisters find personal and collective fulfilment outside of heterosexual norms by conducting LGBTQIA+ activism through performance arts, sexual health and drug

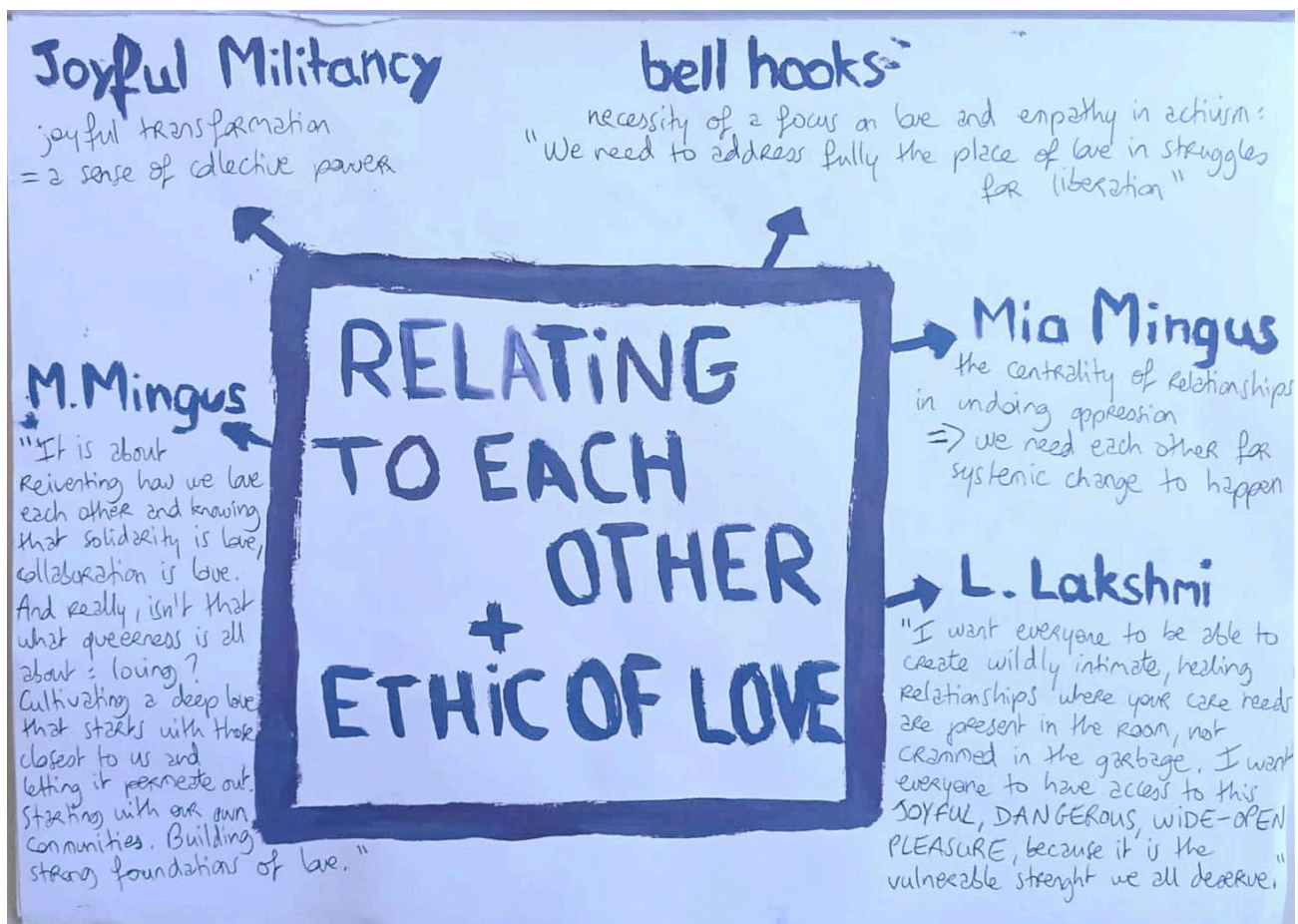
prevention, offering education on queerness and safe sex. In all of my participants' experiences, building a community around their queer advocacy has been and continues to be a way of caring for each other and exploring their own relationship to queerness, while pursuing their fight for equity and LGBTQIA+ rights.



Yan's gratitude towards the Centre LGBTQIA+'s decision to place joy and fun at the centre of their volunteers' training reminded me of Lorde's perception of self-care as an act of preservation and political warfare. Yan found it easier to make friends thanks to the Centre's focus on the well-being of its volunteers: in our interview they clearly stated "we volunteer here to provide support, but this support exists **to aim for joy**". This implies that on the one hand, the Centre's main goal is to make queer lives easier by taking care of different aspects of the visitors' queer experiences, so that these lives can retrieve a space for joy and self-fulfilment. On the other hand, the Centre pursues these same goals of retrieving joy and self-fulfilment for its volunteers through team-building activities, queer parties just for volunteers, free events and other benefits. By making efforts for the volunteers to feel good and have their needs met, the Centre encourages self-care and mutual support between volunteers. On another level, the joy expressed by Clayton when describing Europride echoes Turesky and Crisman's (2023) view of queer spatial joy as political resistance. Pride marches occupy public spaces with a celebratory purpose, and their focus on queer pleasure conveys a strong message to the "straight state" (Canaday, 2009 in Turesky and



Crisman, 2023, p.270). In Clayton's words, "It is that time where we need to be reminded of where we've come from, the struggles we've had to overcome and the challenges. And to remind others that we exist, because ultimately it's also a show." The Pride des Banlieues serves a direct purpose of political resistance, clearly announced in the opening line of their Call to Demonstrate 2024 ("The fight against the far right cannot be reduced to a universal struggle; we must recognise the multiple and interconnected realities of oppression. We refuse to see our struggles instrumentalised to serve interests that betray us.") The very essence of the Pride des Banlieues is rooted in resistance, since it was created as a response to the over-representation of White, middle-class, cisgender and able-bodied participants in Pride marches. The organisers and participants make use of the queer spatial joy of this event to fight for the rights of the queer populations of working-class areas.



When pursuing social change, bell hooks warns us against the pitfall of concentrating solely on dismantling systems that oppress us directly, as it can inadvertently sustain these systems, allowing them to continue oppressing others (bell hooks, 2006, p.243). Charlie's testimony illustrates bell hooks' posture, by insisting on bringing forward the indirect damages from queerphobia when accumulated with other oppressions ("But what doesn't make the news is those who indirectly die from it [queerphobia]. From uneducated medical

personnel, from poverty, from isolation, untreated mental health issues, and these people die, and they do not have time for reform!”). Charlie calls for an empathy across struggles for liberation, as their union is currently fighting against a new decree from the Belgian Ministry of Education that would make the higher education system less accessible to underprivileged students. This focus on empathy goes hand in hand with the centrality of relationships that Mingus (2012) advocates for, exemplified in the dynamics of LGBTI+ Gozo’s interactions, as in our focus group they repeatedly mentioned the importance of the friendships developed with each other. The emotional intimacy between them was also made visible by the fact that they finished each other’s sentences several times, and often exclaimed the same words or reactions simultaneously. They expressed that their queer joy was found mainly within their chosen families (the code “Belonging, guidance, support system” appeared five times in the transcript), and LGBTI+ Gozo organises a lot of events to foster social links in the queer community of Malta’s sister island. The necessity of relationships in acknowledging and undoing oppression was also illustrated in Alex’s testimony: the Human Library project allowed people from different minorities to understand each other’s lived experiences while educating school students about the issues they face in their daily lives.

## Collective learning, bottom-up approach and convergence of struggles in the social movements studied

When analysing the results, I looked back at Kilgore’s (1999, p.197) four components of collective learning in social movements to see if they appeared in my participants’ testimonies : a sense of collective identity, group consciousness, solidarity and organisation.

Several interview fragments used for answering the first sub-question reflect a sense of collective identity and group consciousness experienced by the participants. LGBTI+ Gozo’s dedication to learning and educating about the queer community in Malta gained concrete meaning when they opened their Rainbow Library with MGRM in 2020<sup>19</sup>. Likewise, Juliette’s testimony illustrates how all the group activities she took part with La Bulle foster a sense of collective consciousness: the monthly Pride celebration and the weekly workshops aim to cultivate social links between queer asylum seekers in Paris and to empower them through validating their queer identity. Sean’s and Alex’s testimonies show their advocacy for solidarity. Sean justified his calling for activism by expressing his solidarity with other

---

<sup>19</sup> [MGRM launches Malta's first LGBTIQ+ Library \(gaymalta.com\)](https://www.gaymalta.com/mgrm-launches-malta-s-first-lgbtiq-library)

communities (“I’m never doing it for me, because I know if I need his help, if my community needed help, I would expect other people to protest in favour of mine. So why shouldn’t I do it first, you know?”), while Alex argued for mutual reciprocity in order to help other communities (“In fact, it’s a new reality that we have to learn. We have to learn, because I am not equipped to talk to a Muslim family, for example, practising Muslim, I have zero skills on that.”)

The Pride des Banlieues implements a dynamic of convergence of struggles. Its purpose and principles of action are an enactment of the antiracist queer feminist theoretical foundations laid out in the theoretical framework. When arguing for a bottom-up approach to collective liberation, Collins (2019) exposed that none of the established theories of power nor any resulting political systems were initially created with marginalised groups in mind. The grassroots activists of Saint-Denis Ville au Coeur acknowledged the lack of representation for queer people in working-class neighbourhoods in the outskirts of Paris, and therefore decided to start the first Pride des Banlieues in 2019 with this specific marginalised group as the main actor and target. Every year since then, French citizens from different parts of the country unite to amplify the voices of queer people from the banlieues, deconstructing the so-called obscurantism of working-class areas and showcasing the determination of underprivileged queer communities to mobilise for a world free of systemic oppression<sup>20</sup>. This march was born and is still carried by the inhabitants of the banlieues, and is an example of intersectional and class solidarities in practice as theorised by Collins (2019). Moreover, as presented in the results section, the Pride des Banlieues implements the principles of organisation and solidarity in the terminology of Kilgore (1999), completing the four elements of collective learning across the social movements I have studied.

## Conclusion

### Limitations of the study

While it is essential for me to opt for an intersectional approach as the foundation of my theoretical framework, I acknowledge that most of the research, theories and studies I have used to write this dissertation came from European and US-based authors and researchers. As a Masters student from Europe, most of the literature I have been exposed to at university were quite Eurocentric, with only a few authors from non-Western civilizations. When building my literature review, I purposely made an effort to branch out and seek

---

<sup>20</sup> [L'événement \(pridedesbanlieues.fr\)](https://www.pridedesbanlieues.fr/)

readings from non-Western authors but again, I found very few of those. I also regret not finding more empirical literature on queer youth social movements, just as I wish there were more research papers exploring the theme of joy in activism.

The dominance of Eurocentric views on queer issues is explained by the major visibility of LGBTQIA+ activism that has been taking place historically in Europe and the US, and the presence in these countries of well-established academic institutions and research infrastructure that support the study of LGBTQIA+ issues in the Western World. Another explanation could be that I can only read in English, French and Spanish which makes it difficult for me to access research and publications in other languages. Therefore, my findings mostly reflect the perceptions and perspectives of White European LGBTQIA+ activists, educators and performers.

## Findings summary

This project aimed to study how the celebratory aspect of queer activism significantly enhances its educational objectives across various spheres. By exploring the different contexts of queer advocacy and activism in France and in Malta and collecting in-depth testimonies of personal experiences from the participants, I have attempted to draw a picture of joy and hope as they appear as vectors for social change in the field of LGBTQIA+ activism. The results showed that queer joy goes beyond the realm of emotions and is in itself political, as summed up by participants who stated that existing within their queerness and taking up space in public has political implications.

The main source of queer joy that came up from the interviews was “Representation and celebration”: the participants recounted memories from Pride marches, queer weddings, anecdotes of validation by loved-ones in their personal lives, or pleasure from seeing a queer character that represents them on mainstream media. On the other hand, as we saw in the previous section, they also insisted on the necessity to normalise queer issues in formal education (Gabi, Alex), in the health sector (Daniele, Juliette), and in everyday life (Luiza, Sean, Yan). Sean said “I’m hoping being queer becomes as mundane as being straight”, and it seems fair to assume that the work of the queer activists, educators, artists and performers who participated in this research tends, to some degree, to this task of normalising queerness until it is perceived as normal.

The contrast between connotations of “queer” associated with left-wing, radical initiatives and “LGBTQIA+” with mainstream institutional advocacy appeared quite clearly in the results of this research. I noticed a strong discrepancy between the testimonies of grassroots activists and those of government advocates. Gabi stated that the Maltese legislation was one of the most LGBTQIA+ oriented in Europe<sup>21</sup>, Clayton explained that the government has not only funded Europride 2023 but also a gender wellbeing clinic, a homeless shelter for LGBTQIA+ people, NGOs initiatives all year round. On a different level Yan, Sean, Crush Velvet and some members of LGBTI+ Gozo told me anecdotes about homophobic encounters in public spaces or on the Internet and insisted on the necessity to keep protesting and maintain a network of community-based support for queer folks in Malta. In fact, the data analysis showed that for participants involved in government-led initiatives, queer joy often comes from “Representation and celebration”<sup>22</sup> whereas for the participants involved in grassroots activism or youth work it comes more from “Support system, sense of belonging and guidance”<sup>23</sup>. This insight into the participants’ individual experiences show very different perceptions of the living conditions of queer people in Malta, Gozo and France.

All the tools and approaches discussed by the participants of this paper are manifestations of their queer joy and are fueled by it. To some, queer joy pushes them to the front of a stage to advocate for queer rights by acting out performances. To others, it places them in government offices to develop political structures that support LGBTQIA+ rights in their country. To others, queer joy motivates them to create artistic outlets for queer youth, to go speak in schools or march in the streets. Whether they might perceive their calling as advocacy or resistance, the participants to this project all foster queer joy in their work, either as a necessary energy that pushes them forward or as a complement to a fulfilling life.

---

<sup>21</sup> “After the Civil Union, the pace of change accelerated very fast and for, you know, 3 or 4 years we had a major piece of legislation being introduced each year. So yeah, so now we're at the top of Ilga Europe's Rainbow Index since 2015. Although other countries are now closing the gap quite considerably, which is a good thing.” extracted from Gabi's interview

<sup>22</sup> Queer weddings and passing of new pieces of legislation (Gabi), seeing queer and gender non-conforming people expressing themselves in public (Clayton)

<sup>23</sup> Finding a chosen family (LGBTI+ Gozo, Crush Velvet), creating meaningful friendships (LGBTI+ Gozo, Marthese)



# References

Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press Books. ISBN-13: 978-082233914.

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2016). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.

Barboza, G. E., Dominguez, S., & Chace, E. (2016). Physical victimization, gender identity and suicide risk among transgender men and women. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 4, 385–390. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2016.08.005>.

Barnett, L. (2018). A phenomenological look at the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning foster youth in the Fresno, CA area (Master's thesis, California State University, Fresno, Health and Human Services). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10211.3/203055>.

Bayrakdar, S., & King, A. (2023). LGBT discrimination, harassment and violence in Germany, Portugal and the UK: A quantitative comparative approach. *Current Sociology*, 71(1), 152–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211039271>.

Bell hooks. (2006). *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. Routledge Classics.  
Bergman, C., & Montgomery, N. (2017). *Joyful Militancy - Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*. AK Press.

Bilge, S. (2012). Developing Intersectional Solidarities: A plea for queer intersectionality. In M. S. Smith & F. Jaffer (Eds.), *Beyond the Queer Alphabet: Conversations on gender, sexuality and intersectionality* (pp. 19-23). Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/1633468/Developing\\_Intersectional\\_Solidarities\\_A\\_Plea\\_for\\_Queer\\_Intersectionality](https://www.academia.edu/1633468/Developing_Intersectional_Solidarities_A_Plea_for_Queer_Intersectionality).

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Brown, a.m. (2019). *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods* (Chapter 1). Oxford University Press.  
<https://ktpu.kpi.ua/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/social-research-methods-alan-bryman.pdf>  
(ISBN 978-0-19-968945-3).

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York, 33.

Checkland, P. B. (1999). *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Cieslik, M. (2015). 'Not Smiling but Frowning': Sociology and the 'Problem of Happiness.' *Sociology*, 49(3), 422–437.

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Collins, P. H. (2019). The Difference That Power Makes: Intersectionality and Participatory Democracy. In O. Hankivsky & J. S. Jordan-Zachery (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Intersectionality in Public Policy* (pp. 7). Palgrave Macmillan.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98473-5\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98473-5_7).

Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–67.

Diallo, R. (2019). *La France tu l'aimes ou tu la fermes?* Textuel. ISBN-13: 978-2845977839.

Doetsch-Kidder, 2012. *Social Change and Intersectional Activism: The Spirit of Social Movement (The Politics of Intersectionality)*.

Drosopoulos, M. (2024). Greece, historic legalization of same-sex marriages. *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa*. Retrieved from  
<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Greece/Greece-historic-legalisation-of-same-sex-marriages-230057>.

Duberman, M. B. (1993). *Stonewall: the definitive story of the LGBTQ rights uprising that changed America*. [New York]. Penguin Random House LLC.

European Parliament Research Service. (2023, May). The rights of LGBTI people in the European Union (PE 747.896). Briefing from the European Parliament. Retrieved from  
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-747896-Rights-of-LGBTI-people-in-the-European-Union-2023-May.pdf>.

Fenech Conti, F. (2020, October 28). Rights of women in Malta defended bravely by young progressive beings. *WHAM*. Retrieved April 7, 2024, from  
<https://wham.com.mt/rights-of-women-young-progressive-beings/>.

Flood, R. L., & Jackson, M. C. (1991). *Creative problem solving: Total systems intervention*. New York: Wiley.

Gray, J., & Cooke, M. (2018). Intersectionality, language and queer lives. *Gender and Language*, 12(4), 401–415. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.37393>.

Goksedef, E. (2023, August 27). France to ban female students from wearing abayas in state schools. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66634890>.

Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge. ISBN 9780415964722. 384 pages.

Hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press. (First Edition, Thus). ISBN-10: 0896082210. 174 pages.

hooks, b. (1999). *All about love: New visions*. William Morrow Paperbacks. ISBN-13: 978-0060959470.

hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity and love*. Washington Square Press. ISBN-13: 978-0743456081.

Jackson, M. C. (1982). The nature of soft systems thinking: The work of Churchman, Ackoff, and Checkland. *Journal of Applied Systems Analysis*, 9, 17-29.

Jackson, M. C. (1985). Social systems theory and practice: The need for a critical approach. *International Journal of General Systems*, 10, 136-151.

Kaplan, D. (2024, March 20). Queer joy as empowerment. Outright Vermont.  
<https://outrightvt.org/blog/embracing-queer-joy-as-a-form-of-empowerment>.

Kilgore, D. W. (1999). Understanding learning in social movements: A theory of collective learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(3), 191-202.

Kijoma, D. (2008). A Review of Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 2(1), 88–91. Retrieved from:  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330327435\\_A\\_Review\\_of\\_Sara\\_Ahmed%27s\\_Queer\\_Phenomenology\\_Orientations\\_Objects\\_Others](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330327435_A_Review_of_Sara_Ahmed%27s_Queer_Phenomenology_Orientations_Objects_Others).

Lavietes, M., & Ramos, E. (2022, March 20). Nearly 240 anti-LGBTQ bills filed in 2022 so far, most of them targeting trans people. NBC News. Retrieved from  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/nearly-240-anti-lgbtq-bills-filed-2022-far-targeting-trans-people-rcna20418>.

Le Monde. (2013, December 24). Mères voilées : que dit le Conseil d'Etat? [Veiled mothers: What does the Council of State say?]. Le Monde.  
[https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2013/12/24/meres-voilees-que-dit-le-conseil-d-etat\\_4339497\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2013/12/24/meres-voilees-que-dit-le-conseil-d-etat_4339497_3224.html).

Le Robert. (n.d.). Définition de iel / iels. Dico en ligne. Retrieved August 8, 2024, from  
<https://dictionnaire.lerobert.com/definition/iel>.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Triangle Classics.

Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social Systems*. (J. Bednarz Jr. & D. Baecker, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

MacEwan University. (2023, March). Celebrating queer joy: A discussion with Dr. Jessica Wright. Retrieved from  
<https://www.macewan.ca/campus-life/news/2023/03/news-queer-joy-23/>.

Malta Gay Rights Movement. (n.d.). About us. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from <https://maltagayrights.org/about/>.

Miskovic, M., & Hoop, K. (2006). Action research meets critical pedagogy: Theory, practice, and reflection. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 269-291.

National LGBT Rights Organization. (2022). Annual Report. Retrieved from <https://www.lgbtrights.org/report-2022>.

O'Hara, M. E. (2019, June 18). 50 Years of Progress: How Stonewall Sparked the Future of Pride. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/stonewall-50-years-pride-parade-lgbtq-842676/>.

Pew Research Center. (2023). The global divide on homosexuality persists. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/06/07/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists>.

Plummer, K. (2005). Critical humanism and queer theory: Living with the tensions. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 357-373). Sage.

Rogers, J., & Thorpe, D. (2021). *Black Joy: Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration*. Random House.

Schneider, F. (2019). Introduction to public health. *Public Health Textbook*. Retrieved from <https://www.healthknowledge.org.uk/public-health-textbook>.

Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press. ISBN-13: 978-1580051545.

Sheng, S. (2019). The body, the closet, and queer intersectionality: Sex, death, and embodied poststructuralism. *Body & Society*, 25(3), 123-153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X19830456>.

Stonewall. (2021). The experiences of LGBT people in the workplace. Stonewall. Retrieved from <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-workplace-report-2021>.

Thorne, S. (2000). Data analysis in qualitative research. *Evidence-Based Nursing*, 3(3), 68-70. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1136/ebn.3.3.68>.

UNAIDS. (2023). UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2023/global-aids-update-2023>.

UNESCO. (2023). International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) 2023. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/idahobit/2023>.

Westbrook, L., & Saperstein, A. (2015). New categories are not enough: Rethinking the measurement of sex and gender in social surveys. *Gender & Society*, 29(4), 534–560. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215584758>.

World Health Organization. (2023). World Mental Health Report 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240067241>.

Wright, E. O., Levine, A. & Sober, E. (1992). *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History*. Verso.

Yee, J. Y. (2023). Social Justice, Intersectionality, and Policy: Challenges and Opportunities. In M. M. Thomas (Ed.), *Social Policy for Social Justice* (pp. 45-67). Routledge.

# Appendix

## List of Acronyms

AAVE: African American Vernacular English, formerly known as Black English Vernacular or Vernacular Black English among sociolinguists. (University of Hawaii - Language Varieties)

AFAB/AMAB: Assigned female at birth / Assigned male at birth. While AFAB or AMAB may be useful for describing different trans or non-binary experiences, they are generally not considered identities in and of themselves. Calling a transman “AFAB,” for example, erases his identity as a man. Instead, use a person’s requested pronouns and self-description. (LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary)

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. While POC is commonly used as an umbrella term for people of colour, the term BIPOC is used to acknowledge that not all people of colour face the same levels of oppression. (Merriam-Webster)

ILGA: International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association. ILGA-Europe is a non-governmental international organisation uniting over 700 organisations from 54 countries across Europe and Central Asia. (ILGA Europe)

LGBTQIA+: Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The additional “+” stands for all of the other identities not encompassed in the short acronym. An umbrella term that is often used to refer to the community as a whole. (LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary)

MGRM: Formerly known as the Malta Gay Rights Movements, MGRM now stands for “Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement”. Non-governmental organisation advocating for the rights and livelihoods of the LGBTQIA+ population in Malta. (MGRM)

NB / enby: Abbreviation of “non binary”. Enby is the phonetic pronunciation. (LGBTQIA+ Resource Center)

SOGIGESC: The Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Unit (SOGIGESC), was set up in June of 2018 to coordinate government policy in the field of LGBTIQ+ equality within the Human Rights Directorate in Malta. (humanrights.gov.mt)

YPB: Young Progressive Beings is an intersectional youth activist group set in Malta which advocates for women’s and minorities’ rights and against systemic oppression.

## Interview scheme

### **Interview and Focus Group Guide: Exploring Queer Joy in LGBTQIA+ Educational Activism**

Note: I chose to opt for the same outline for the interviews and the focus group, while keeping a semi-structured approach for both. The questions aim to explore 3 areas where joy and LGBTQIA+ experience or activism might intersect : the individual perception of the queer experience, the experience of queer joy in activism, and the educational aspect.

**Introduction:** Hello and welcome! Thank you for joining me today. This interview aims to delve into your personal journey as an LGBTQIA+ activist / as members of an LGBTQIA+ activist group, focusing on the themes of queer joy, the emotional landscape of your identity, and the educational aspects of your activism. Your unique perspective and insights will contribute greatly to my understanding of the roles of positive dimensions within LGBTQIA+ activism. Please feel free to share openly, and rest assured that your responses will be handled with the utmost confidentiality. This conversation is a space for your authentic voice, and I appreciate your willingness to be a part of this exploration. Thank you for being here!

#### **Question 1 : Joy, hope and positive emotions in the queer experience**

As a queer individual, how do you personally experience joy and hope within the LGBTQIA+ community?

Are there specific events, relationships, or aspects of your identity that contribute to these positive emotions?

#### **Question 2 : Queer joy in activism**

Can you share moments or experiences in your LGBTQIA+ activism that have brought you a sense of joy and fulfilment?

How does the concept of queer joy manifest in your work?

#### **Question 3 : Educating through activism In your role as an LGBTQIA+ activist**

How do you approach the task of educating others about queer issues?

Can you share specific instances where you've felt a positive impact or encountered challenges in fostering understanding and empathy?

Closing: Thank you for sharing your insights today. If there's anything else you'd like to add, please feel free. Your contributions are valuable, and your confidentiality is paramount. I really appreciate your time and participation in my research.

Note: This interview is designed to be semi-structured. Therefore the questions were used as a guide in order to cover the three key areas of my research, but the flow of the conversation determined the direction of each interview. Usually we jumped from one area to another according to the flow of thoughts of the participant. Depending on the participant's reactions, I encouraged them to dive deeper into the questions that they seem most responsive to, with probing prompts such as the following :

- Tell me more.
- Why was that important to you?
- How did that affect you?
- Can you explain what you mean by that?
- What was your contribution?
- What do you think was really making it work?
- How has it changed you?