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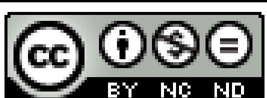

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LGBT+ Volunteering in English Higher Education: Care and Community

Pippa Sterk

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT+) volunteering communities in English Higher Education have grappled with massive cultural and legislative changes over the past decade: on one hand, the relatively secure legal standing of LGBT+ communities in England has meant that these communities are now more visible in the university landscape than ever. On the other hand, the continued marketisation of Higher Education has put limits on how these communities can function within their institutions. Although much research has been conducted on the experiences of LGBT+ people in universities, this has tended to be phrased solely in demographic terms. However, there has been very little research on how LGBT+ university communities operate *as* communities.

In order to investigate how university-based LGBT+ communities make sense of their ambivalent positioning within and/or against academic institutional context, I conducted interviews and focus group sessions with nineteen LGBT+ volunteers at English universities, and conducted a Thematic Analysis on the resulting transcripts. I combined this with a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of university-published promotional material, as well as integrating reflexive discussions of my own experiences as a volunteer within university-based LGBT+ communities. Building on critiques of linear time, normative kinship, and neoliberal notions of success and failure, I examine why people join LGBT+ volunteering communities, what these communities ‘do’ within the university landscape, how they are presented *by* the university, and ultimately the value that these communities bring to the university. My analysis contributes to LGBT+ educational scholarship by considering not just how educational spaces can *include* LGBT+ people more effectively, but also how educational spaces can be guided and transformed by the value systems created within LGBT+ volunteering communities. I argue that my participants’ experiences of facilitating informal care, alternative kinship structures and

celebrating ‘small’ or imperfect successes, often runs counter to the institutional values of the university, and as such can prompt a rethinking of how Higher Education is structured altogether.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Halfway through my final year of my undergraduate degree, my hair started falling out. After months of sleeping 4-6 hours a night, eating at irregular times, and feeling like I was always either in a meeting or preparing for a meeting, my body finally caught up with me. While this is not entirely uncommon for undergraduate students in the neoliberal academy, what *was* slightly unusual was that this perpetual sense of urgency was not caused by the demands of my degree itself, or even by work or family circumstances. I was just a very dedicated volunteer in several of my university's lesbian, gay, bi, and trans (LGBT+) communities. Even though there were clear physical signs of how detrimental my commitment to volunteering was, I never thought about scaling down on my responsibilities. The various LGBT+ communities were where I found my friends, where there were people who cared about the same things as I did. I thought I was having fun, and for the most part I was.

A year after I graduated, some friends and I were invited to join the university's alumni block in the local Pride parade. When we tried to step onto the float wearing our own clothing, we were told (by someone whom I had never met while being a volunteer) that taking part was contingent upon us wearing a branded university t-shirt. It was a small gesture, but it felt enormously symbolic - this was no longer a space I had any co-creative say in, nor was it a space that was aimed *at* me. Instead, I was there to fulfil a very specific outward function, to represent the university in all its rainbow diversity. While I had put a lot of my time, effort, and health into helping create LGBT+ communities on campus, the moment I became an alumna, this work was flattened into just another success story to be literally paraded around on behalf of the branded university.

Of course, being asked to wear a particular t-shirt is not the end of the world. However, as I encountered more and more stories of people who had been involved as LGBT+ volunteers at their university, I realised that the resentment around small acts like these was partially caused by this being such a familiar and predictable trajectory: this was not just an isolated request by an individual, it was just one of many instances where institutional views on how/when to show off LGBT+ presence, does not necessarily align with the views of the LGBT+ people who are doing work to maintain that presence.

This thesis starts from a sense of curiosity for how deep frustration can blossom out of deep care - care for communities that were once the centre of my life, and frustration that this centrality was not mirrored by the institution in which the community was located. It is also an attempt at making sense of why these feelings run so deep in the first place: I started my undergraduate degree over a decade ago - why did I feel so invested in a community that I was going to leave after a couple of years anyway? Why do I still feel so wronged by an institution that has since had massive changes to its staff and structure? Do others feel the same way?

While these are clearly personal questions, these concerns are embedded in larger trends in the practice and study of LGBT+ community-building: undeniable legal and social integration of LGBT+ communities has taken place in England, yet this has also had the effect of potentially delimiting what a ‘proper’ LGBT+ life looks like. If LGBT+ people are now largely legally and socially *able* to participate in normative organisational life, this can be contingent on an expectation that we *should* participate, and that we should *want* this too. Where the integration of LGBT+ people into an institution (be this a national, legal, or educational institution) will require the institution to change, vice versa this integration might require a change in the (self-)conceptualisation and (self-)presentation of LGBT+ communities too.

It is for these reasons that I am exploring LGBT+ *volunteering*: being a university-based volunteer, one occupies a position both inside and outside the university. The LGBT+ volunteer is an insides, in the sense that being part of the university as a staff member or student is a requirement for taking part in this volunteering in the first place. Volunteers inevitably represent some form of relation to the university, if only because their work is seen as important enough to publicise and formalise through the demarcating of organising structures and job roles. They are simultaneously an outsider to the university, in the sense that this relation is not formalised through financial remuneration or permanent workload allocation. Universities cannot demand that someone volunteer their time to particular causes or in particular ways, and there is (on paper) no material incentive for the volunteer that requires them to continue working in any capacity that they do not want. Volunteers occupy the liminal space of the university both as a 'traditional' place of work, teaching and learning, and as an increasingly marketised and neoliberalised entity. They are therefore well-positioned to provide accounts of the university, and any changes it has been going through (these changes will be further explored in the next section), both through a lens of familiarity with its structure and procedures, as well as considering these structures and procedures through the eyes of a stranger.

I am investigating volunteering *communities* specifically, exactly because I am interested in this positioning of collective, rather than solely individual LGBT+ identity in relation to the university. Much LGBT+ research conceptualises the/an 'LGBT+ community' as a demographic category, a set of people brought together by shared individual identification or shared social positionality (e.g. Burleson, 2010; Yost and Gilmore, 2011; Garvey and Rankin, 2015; Vaccaro and Newman, 2016; Grimwood, 2017; Kulick *et al.*, 2017; Smidt *et al.*, 2021). However, in university-based LGBT+ volunteering groups, this choice to position oneself to the university in a way that is at once individual *and* representative of a community, requires investigation too.

Throughout this thesis, I will explore this relation between the institutional and the individual: when they differ, when they align, and how volunteers strategically navigate these relations. In this introductory chapter, I will firstly outline the social, cultural and political context in which this research has taken place. I will then discuss how this led to the formulation of particular research questions, and how I practically and epistemologically sought to answer these questions. I give a brief overview of findings and interventions, before concluding by giving an overview of the structure of the thesis as a whole.

1.1 Setting the scene

"The dominant ideology often responds to opposition, not by attempting to stamp it out, but rather by allowing it to exist within the places that it assigns, by slowly allowing it to be recognised, but only within the terms of a process which deprives it of any real or effective oppositional force." (Hall, 2016)

In the past couple of decades, English Higher Education has become caught up in a series of discursive and structural contradictions: on one hand, tuition and rising living costs continue to make student life more expensive (ONS, 2023), while on the other hand academic staff too are more and more likely to experience uncertainty through precarious contracting and pension cuts (Loveday, 2018). In order to justify this unequal flow of capital, university education is presented towards students as a luxury good to invest in (Thornton and Shannon, 2014), while it is presented towards staff as a career that thrives on the passion of providing a necessary societal good (Marini, 2023), rather than financial and professional stability.

As the Higher Education sector undergoes this process of neoliberalisation, discourses around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) have become integrated into this framework: EDI

commitments too, are variably positioned as something to consume at will, at the same time as they are positioned as essential parts of institutional life (Wernick, 2006; Meade, Kiely and O'Donovan, 2023). LGBT+ voluntary workers within Higher Education are positioned at the intersection of all these structures and discourses: as voluntary workers, they may be implicated in and beholden to the marketised structures of the university, but they do not receive a material benefit from this. Yet as staff and students, they are still tied financially to the university either through their wages, their tuition fees, or both. As *LGBT+* voluntary workers specifically, they occupy a position of relatively recent social and institutional acceptance: LGBT+ communities in England have experienced a wide shift in legal and social standing, leading to a complex relation to institutional and civil life. Where openly identifying as LGBT+ would have led to an immediate loss of institutional power several decades ago, LGBT+ people in the twenty-first century now occupy spaces in governing bodies where this previously might have seemed impossible: from leadership within the educational sector (Lee, 2020) to the House of Lords (UK Parliament, 2023), to a formalised LGBT+ wing of the Conservative Party (LGBT+ Conservatives, 2023).

However, this incorporation of LGBT+ people into institutional life is not just very recently won, it is also highly conditional and politically instrumentalised. As will become evident from my participants' narratives, the fact that some LGBT+ individuals have access to some formalised positions of power within educational, political, and policy-making institutions, does not mean that institutional and everyday homophobia, biphobia and transphobia have disappeared or even significantly diminished - they have merely changed shape. Such access to power has also meant that claiming an LGBT+ identity is no longer (if it ever was) an act that automatically leaves one as the institutional underdog, or an act that implies solidarity with other marginalised communities. In fact, in the past couple of decades the alleged protection of LGBT+ communities has routinely been used to justify the maintenance of institutional power, rather

than dismantling or questioning the just-ness of this power. LGBT+ causes have been used as a rhetorical tool to justify strengthening border regimes (Holzberg, Madörin and Pfeifer, 2021), military aggression from the imperial core (Puar, 2007), and a relegation of politics to the individual, private sphere rather than employing more collectivist practices (Duggan, 2003). As the Stuart Hall quote that opened this section makes clear, it is not only possible, but expected for formerly counter-hegemonic communities to be taken up into dominant ideology.

At the moment of writing, December 2023, England has just seen its Minister for Women and Equalities, Kemi Badenoch, proclaim that gender-affirming care for young people, including social transition[1], is a form of same-sex conversion therapy - the argumentation being that parents would prefer a straight trans child, to a cisgender gay one (Adu, 2023). By spinning this unfounded narrative, Badenoch effectively opposes advancements in medical and social care for trans people by arguing it is directly detrimental for lesbian, gay, and bi people. Specifically the invocation of the vulnerability and impressionability of 'the child' as a cultural figure, echoes the concerns that preceded the introduction of Section 28 of the Local Government Act under the Thatcher government (*Local Government Act 1988*, 1988; Bell and Cumper, 2003): the cultural narrative that gay men and lesbians were so persistent and successful in seducing vulnerable young people into the gay lifestyle, was powerful enough that for 15 years the English government thought it appropriate to effectively ban any discussion of same-sex relationships in schools. Of course, the vulnerability of lesbian and gay children was hereby made discursively impossible, just as for Badenoch the vulnerability of transgender children is preemptively invisibilised by only ever seeing childhood trans identification as a threat.

[1]Social transition refers to the process whereby trans people start "living, across all contexts, in the social role with which they identify" (NHS Gender Identity Development Service, 2023). This may include starting to use a different name and pronouns, wearing different clothing, or using different gendered spaces like bathrooms or changing rooms.

Although vastly different in process, I want to compare this dynamic to the way that Israel's continuous violent occupation of Gaza has received political and military support from many Western nations. The occupation of Gaza, which has become more deadly since 7 October 2023, has been narrated towards the rest of the world as justifiable, in part through the positioning of Palestinians as uniquely and monstrously homophobic (Dabbous, 2023). This justification of military aggression in the name of protecting LGBT+ communities, while simultaneously presenting Israel as a safe haven under attack, is a practice known as 'pinkwashing' (Hartal, 2022). Pinkwashing too has a historical precedent - Jasbir Puar noted in 2007 that the US invasion of Iraq and the (highly sexualised) torture of Iraqi prisoners by the US military, was made justifiable by portraying Iraq and the Muslim faith altogether as hubs of sexual degeneracy and hypocrisy (Puar, 2007). Torture and dehumanisation of entire peoples should of course never be justified, including as a response to (perceived or actual) homophobia. However, the poignancy of this reasoning that deserves particular attention, is the lack of discursive space to imagine the existence of non-homophobic Palestinians at all, let alone LGBT+ Palestinians.

Clearly, the ability to understand when and how the safety and welfare of LGB(T+) communities is being utilised strategically, seems more pertinent than ever. Judith Butler provides the helpful terms 'grievable lives' and 'precarious lives' to structure this understanding (Butler, 2004).
In defining whose LGBT+ lives are narrated as grievable and whose are not, there is a reification of whose lives are *valuable* and whose are not, whose lives can be deemed at risk at all and whose lives were never deemed proper lives to begin with. Furthermore, positioning a life as grievable can position actions to prevent or avenge this grief as justifiable. In this discursive positioning, choices are constantly being made about whose emotions are prioritised, who gets to speak on behalf of a community, and whose bodies are deemed on the inside and outside of LGBT+ communities. What is at stake is the power to decide, discursively, what a

LGBT+ community *is* within a given circumstance, and what this ‘being’ subsequently *does* to a cultural narrative. It is therefore necessary to critically investigate how the positioning of a community can be used for a variety of ends, including ends that some who are ostensibly *within* this community, might not agree with.

Given this well-examined friction between LGBT+ communities and the institutions that proclaim to serve them, it is all the more surprising that research on how English LGBT+ students and university staff work with/against/around their institutions remains scarce (although this research is of course not non-existent, as will be discussed in chapter 2). It is especially surprising given the highly emotionally and politically laden public discourses which have positioned LGBT+ communities’ relationship to Higher Education as a key conflict in the culture wars: LGBT+ scholarship, community-building and activism within Higher Education is routinely devalued as a circular, un-impactful conversation, only concerning an elite realm of left-wing academics (Slater, 2023). At the same time, LGBT+ communities are positioned as a highly powerful threat to academic freedom, indoctrinating public discourse through the university (Horbury and Yao, 2020; Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020; Herbert, 2023). As it is the regulation of trans bodies which (at the time of writing) has captured formal political discourse most overtly, it is necessary to point out that most of these grievances are aimed at trans women’s presence within Higher Education, as an ostensible threat to (cis) women’s position within these institutions. Whether universities act in affirmation or defiance of these public narratives is bound to have an everyday effect on the communities that move within the institution, and a further effect on the individuals that facilitate these communities.

In turn, whether volunteers respond to the university with scepticism or acceptance, whether they see universities as places of acceptance or hostility (or indeed something in-between or outside the two), will inevitably tell us something about the power that the institution holds,

how/when it elects to wield this power, and to what extent LGBT+ volunteers can resist or strategically respond to this power. I will therefore investigate how LGBT+ volunteers navigate institutional and communal narratives both socially and politically, both interpersonally and collectively. This thesis explores how LGBT+ volunteers creatively (and often inconsistently) position themselves with and against institutional narratives, institutional values, and institutional practices, in order to create LGBT+ communities within their universities.

1.2 Research question and problems

As has been highlighted through the anecdote which started off this chapter, many people engaging in LGBT+ volunteering at university are young, inexperienced, and/or busy when they start doing this work. I will explore what it is about their communities that makes it worthwhile enough to spend a significant amount of time building and maintaining these spaces, in a context where time and resources are scarce. Furthermore, I will examine how these pressures may give rise to particular dynamics *within* LGBT+ volunteering communities, as well as being the cause for some volunteers leaving their communities.

At the same time, what is important or valuable about LGBT+ communities from a student and staff perspective, may not be the same as what is important about these communities from an institutional perspective. Indeed, as my own experience showed, the notion of 'community' which to me felt highly layered and emotionally complex, became flattened into a simple narrative of positivity once it was displayed towards a wider public. To attend to the possibility that the same community experiences may be portrayed and narrativised in a variety of ways, I will analyse how the narratives *by* LGBT+ volunteers compare to institutional narratives *about* these communities.

My overarching concern lies with the nature of the relationship between LGBT+ volunteering communities and the institutions in which they are situated, as narrated by volunteers. Whether LGBT+ communities are presented as an integrated part of the university, or an oppositional force to the university (or indeed whether they are presented as something else altogether), will have implications for how these communities are delineated, experienced, and governed by those who participate in them, as well as what volunteers think is the 'point' of volunteering. Vice versa, the position of LGBT+ communities within or outside the university, will impact the extent to which these communities have access to institutional power, as well as what is done with this institutional power - in short, it may impact how the very constitution of the institution is imagined. To examine what it is LGBT+ volunteering is seen to 'do' to universities, and what situatedness within a university is seen to 'do' to LGBT+ volunteering, my principal research question is formulated as follows:

What is the value of LGBT+ volunteering communities at university?

In order to investigate the institutional and communal intricacies of university LGBT+ volunteering, I will be led by four sub-questions which broadly correspond to chapters 4 to 7. In chapter 4, I explore how volunteers narrate their entry into LGBT+ volunteering, why they think of volunteering as a worthwhile or necessary activity, and how the socio-cultural standing of LGBT+ communities in wider society shapes the motivation for getting involved with volunteering at university. The exploration of how this complex dynamic may be experienced, was formulated in the following question:

1. *What draws people to LGBT+ volunteering communities?*

In chapter 5, I examine how volunteers imagined participation in 'LGBT+ communities'

altogether, who implicitly ‘belonged’ in these communities and who did not. Aside from these conceptual investigations, I also examine the more practical reasons that certain demographics might be more or less likely to participate in their university LGBT+ community, such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The question that underpins this chapter was formulated as follows:

2. *Who gets to participate in LGBT+ volunteer communities and what are the experiences of different people participating in them?*

In chapter 6 I investigate if, when, and how the experiences and efforts of my participants are made visible by/within the university. As EDI has become more integrated into the marketing of universities, I wanted to know what exactly constitutes EDI in the marketised imagination. In particular, again, there is the question of whether LGBT+ people are only depicted/spoken about in demographic terms (people who may be present at a university or not), or whether there is an actual depiction of LGBT+ communities as active and dynamic communities. More specifically, I am interested in whether the time and effort that goes into maintaining these communities is depicted for an outward audience. This was formulated in the following research question:

3. *To what extent are universities’ outward communication about equality, diversity and inclusion work reflective of my participants’ experiences?*

In chapter 7, I explore the seemingly contradictory principles and practices that underpin much of LGBT+ volunteering. In particular, I focus on the circulation of ‘care’ as a central term structuring LGBT+ volunteering, how care is conceptualised, and how care is or is not enforced within these communities. Furthermore, I discuss how the ambivalent attachments that many volunteers have to their communities, can serve to open up new ways of thinking about the

purpose of Higher Education altogether, by challenging taken-for-granted ideas of success within the academy. The question around which this chapter was structured, was formulated in the following way:

4. *How do practices within university LGBT+ volunteering affirm or subvert neoliberal notions of success?*

All these questions are fundamentally concerned with the delineation, choice, and narrativisation of values and priorities - how volunteers choose to spend their time, whose issues become prioritised, what is seen as a 'core' problem and what is seen as 'extra', all depend on the angle with which one approaches LGBT+ volunteering. This angle, of course, will inevitably be value-laden, even (or particularly) if these values may seem so self-explanatory that they no longer need naming. Indeed, it is exactly my aim *to* name them, to uncover how both the reiteration and (attempted) subversion of taken-for-granted power dynamics may structure community volunteering. Of course, the university as an institution and the volunteering communities within it, occupy very different positions of power, and volunteers may be consciously working with/against their institutions to various extents. It is my aim to analyse how and why volunteers choose to navigate the positions of power, and how this navigation can inform new approaches to Higher Education.

1.3 Method

In order to answer these questions, I conducted 19 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with LGBT+ volunteers who had worked within a university setting between 2017 and 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted online. All participants were invited to take part in one of three follow-up focus group discussions. These focus group sessions were aimed

at verifying whether preliminary conclusions about volunteering narratives were reflective of participants' experiences, but also to see how participants narrated their experiences as similar or different to each other, rather than looking at these experiences in isolation.

I chose to use both semi-structured interviews and focus groups, because these formats allowed me to speak directly to my participants and build up an interpersonal bond with them in real time, however briefly, rather than seeing the data collection process as a distant and impersonal process, focused on efficiency. I here take inspiration from feminist ethnographic methods, which emphasise prolonged interaction, and communal engagement (Coffey, 1999; Back and Puwar, 2012). Similarly, by giving up on high levels of structure and control within the research process, I wanted to embrace the possibility of being led by contingency and chance, to allow myself to be excited by the connections I might come across and create, rather than resigning myself to recreating connections I am already familiar with. Sara Ahmed calls this a 'politics of the hap' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 223), a politics which is so fundamental to research with historically marginalised communities: a desire to pay attention to 'what happens' when contingency is actively sought out, affirms both the possibility of stories existing outside of rigid societal structures, as well as affirming the epistemological value of these stories.

Furthermore, the interviews and focus groups allowed participants to have a level of input and control over the conversation which a more structured method may not have allowed. For instance, participants may bring up aspects of volunteering which are so alien to my own experience, that I would have never thought of incorporating them into the research schedule. Participants may foreground issues which to me would have seemed unimportant, and background those which I would have thought of as paramount (Wray and Bloomer, 2012). Moreover, allowing participants to lead the conversation in their chosen direction, means that there was less of a chance that my individual view of the matters would dominate over what my

participants brought to the table (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). This is important to me both ethically and in terms of the value of my findings - if my interest lies with volunteer narratives and volunteer experiences it should follow that this should be, in the first place, narrated by volunteers themselves. Otherwise I might as well have written a fully theoretical or literature-based thesis. This is not to deny my own inevitable partial framing and input as a researcher, it simply means that the inevitability of my partiality is not a good enough reason to deny my participants the opportunity for agency in the research process altogether.

After conducting the interviews and focus groups, I transcribed the recordings and coded them in NVivo. I used Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Versus Coding (Saldaña, 2009) in order to manage the data, and identify patterns of repetition, contrast, and distinctiveness. In coding and analysing the transcripts, I worked with Braun and Clarke's system of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This system integrates the creation of thematic codes and themes, with the analysis of the data as a whole. This allowed me to 'zoom in' on minute aspects of participant narratives, such as word-choice or individual sentence-construction, while maintaining a focus on the larger discourses in which these narratives were embedded. It was important to have this constant movement between the macro and the micro, as my thesis is exactly concerned with the ways that individual choices are informed by the structures in which they are made, and vice versa, how individual choices contribute to the (re)creation of structural dynamics. My analysis therefore integrates an examination of form with an examination of content.

In order to compare these narratives to university-authored narratives, I conducted a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) on three student experience videos and three EDI policy pages. MCDA works within the linguistic tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a type of analysis which is concerned with the examination of power in/through language (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2001). CDA does not assume that texts are merely a reflection of the world 'out

there' which may be deemed more accurate or less accurate, it instead sees texts as always implicated in struggles for power, hegemony, and truth. It is the analyst's responsibility to find out how a text is positioned in relation to power structures, and who benefits from texts being read a particular way.

MCDA takes this critical engagement with written/spoken language, and expands that to incorporate texts in the broadest sense of the word - i.e. including texts that may wholly or partially consist of auditory, visual, or indeed *multimodal* aspects of communication. MCDA therefore relies on analysing these elements in the context of their medium: it is not enough to only analyse the written text of a webpage, or the spoken text in a video. Attention also needs to be paid to framing, focus, colour balance, et cetera (Machin and Mayr, 2012). MCDA also incorporates what it means to juxtapose or combine these different mediums: for instance, writing can feel infinitely more 'written' in its quality when it is placed next to an image, and similarly images may seem exponentially more visual when compared to writing. It is important to employ a multimodal perspective here, given that university marketing relies less and less on physical, written prospectuses, and is more and more conducted in the online sphere. Looking at both (audio-)visual and written aspects of the texts, I considered how the student videos and EDI webpages used conventions of genre to position LGBT+ concerns within neoliberal and highly outcome-focused discourses. I then compared this to the narratives from my participants, looking again for repetition, contrast, and distinctiveness: how did the university-authored documents align with my participants' stories, and how did they differ?

1.4 Epistemological frame

As noted in section 1.1, scholarship that centres LGBT+ people's experiences of Higher Education tends to imagine the category 'LGBT+' as a demographic one: a student or staff

member either ‘is’ or ‘is not’ LGBT+. It is understandable that ‘LGBT+’ may be used in this way in research underpinned by quantitative principles, as this allows for the neat categorisation of data. However, when conducting qualitative research, this quickly becomes problematic. Firstly, it does not account for shifts in identity, or situations where people may find it difficult to define their identity in the binary of LGBT+/not LGBT+[2]. Secondly, by focusing on LGBT+ *people* as if they constitute a pre-existing group, we may miss the ability to investigate how LGBT+ communities at university operate as communities of *practice*, rather than *identification*. By this I mean that it is very unlikely that every single LGBT+ person at a given university will join their LGBT+ student network or staff network. An examination of university-based LGBT+ communities therefore needs to be investigated with an eye to the cultures, habits, norms and values that are (re)produced in/through these communities. It is this focus on LGBT+ *community* and what it can tell us about the relation between individual and communal identity, which is central to my thesis.

Furthermore, much previous scholarship (such as the majority of studies cited in section 1.1) focuses on what universities can do to improve the lives of their LGBT+ students and staff. This too, is eased by the treatment of ‘LGBT+’ as a demographic category, as it presupposes that there is a predefined student/staff body, some of whom are LGBT+, and it is the university’s task to make LGBT+ students and staff feel more comfortable in their time at the university. What it does not allow for, is a more norm-critical (Plotnikof *et al.*, 2022) approach to institutional uptake of EDI matters, for instance through investigation of how universities can function to stratify the student/staff body even before they have joined the institution. By providing an alternative view of LGBT+ communities *and* universities as entities that may be respondent to socio-political context, as well as influencing these contexts themselves, it becomes possible to investigate

[2] Not to mention that we can of course question what it means to make LGBT+ identity a category measured only through self-declaration. See the chapter 2 section on performativity for an elaboration on this issue.

how universities can selectively pick up on certain aspects of LGBT+ communities while not picking up on others.

This concern with the use and circulation of categorisation, necessarily required a post-structural approach to narrativisation to investigate this topic further (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). By this, I mean that I focused on the fact that narratives necessarily position certain truths, categories, identities and oppositions as taken-for-granted in order to function *as* meaningful and intelligible narratives (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 2003): there are certain expectations or conventions within any given narrative that are presented as so fundamental to a text's intelligibility, that they form a sort of invisible, unnamed scaffolding which becomes the 'natural' backdrop against which more obviously ideological narratives can take place. This scaffolding *needs* to be taken-for-granted by the reader[3] in order for the text to make sense at all. At the same time, what it is exactly that is taken-for-granted, can change from context to context. It is my aim to make this invisible scaffolding visible, to find out how certain positionalities, entities, and identities become naturalised within different contexts, and how participants draw relations between them.

More specifically, I will be working with post-structural approaches as developed through Queer Theory. As a field, Queer Theory has concerned itself with the examination of power in and through discourses of gender and sexuality. This means not just paying attention to the points where naturalisation of gendered and sexual subject position occurs, but also searching for how this naturalisation may be resisted, subverted, or rejected altogether (Turner, 2000). This requires a level of reflexivity too, both in relation to my participants and my own role as a researcher - nominally operating from a position of resistance runs the risk of this resistance

[3] I am using the word 'reader' here in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. the interpreter of a text, in whatever medium this may be.

remaining nominal and identitarian, rather than examining how one's positionality may be a point of departure to enact broader solidarity and action, *as well as* potentially functioning as a normalising force (Cohen, 2005; Wiegman and Wilson, 2015). Furthermore, working from a presumption that my participants inevitably operated from a minoritised point of view, runs the risk of considering LGBT+ identity as the sole identity through which my participants experienced the university. In my research I take an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989) critically investigating how other forms of marginalisation dynamically interacted with my participants' affiliation to their LGBT+ communities. My aim is therefore not to present my participants, LGBT+ volunteering communities, or indeed this thesis as straightforwardly and intrinsically counter-hegemonic. Rather, I will reflexively analyse how LGBT+ community-building and scholarship (including my own) operates both through and against power.

As I was myself a volunteer in university LGBT+ spaces, I will be framing parts of my analysis through personal anecdotes, and the emotions that I experienced in these spaces. I am drawing here on feminist epistemological traditions that use the realm of the situated and the personal to examine the structural, and vice versa (Butler, 1988; Haraway, 1988; Ahmed, 2017). By, again, moving between the macro and the micro, it is possible to understand "how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context" (Butler, 1988, p. 522). By drawing on my 'own' experiences, I want to explore exactly how these are *not* just my own, but how they can be understood as both resulting from and informing the collective context in which the experiences arose.

In addition to reflecting on the link between individual and communal experiences, I will also reflect on how the interviews and focus groups themselves functioned as a shared social event, similar to the ones which many LGBT+ communities organise. This was partially a question of,

once again, making the form of my research match its content. If I am researching LGBT+ communities, why not do this in a manner that might create some communal connections, either between myself and my participants or among my participants (Wilkinson, 2006, p. 61). However, a more significant reason for reflecting on the social function of interviews and focus groups, was recognising my own affective investment in the social dynamics of conducting interviews and focus groups: I am used to talking to people about LGBT+ issues, either personally or in groups. I have organised and led these discussions dozens of times outside of the context of research, I keep coming back to it, and I would like to think that by now I am very good at it. I enjoy doing it and I continue to find it interesting and engaging to connect to people in this way. The social aspect of conducting interviews and focus groups, evokes the same excitement that led me to conduct this research at all, and it is exactly the meaning and circulation of this excitement which I aim to analyse within my thesis.

1.5 Arguments and key interventions

Through the interviews and focus groups, I was able to draw out several characteristics of LGBT+ university-based organising:

1. *The value of LGBT+ volunteers' work lies in their ability to create a chosen 'community of strangers'.*

For LGBT+ people, the home and the family tend to be spaces that are highly alienating (Weston, 1997; Halberstam, 2011; Milsom, 2021). Given the traditional functions of the home and the family as sites that (re)produce normative ways of relating, it is unsurprising that LGBT+ people might feel that their deviation from these normativities makes them feel a 'stranger' to these places (Ahmed, 2010). Alternatively, the university has been cited as a space of LGBT+

self-exploration, exactly because there is more freedom of choice in *whom* one chooses to interact with, and *how* these interactions are navigated (Yost and Gilmore, 2011; Kulick *et al.*, 2017). Yet, there has been very little investigation into how these elements of choice and freedom govern kinship structures in intentional university-based LGBT+ communities.

My participants' narratives show that LGBT+ volunteers were interested specifically in creating spaces where it was possible for participants to share their experiences *as* LGBT+ people, *with* other LGBT+ people. Specifically, the sensation of having been made a conceptual ‘stranger’ to one’s environment at home or in the family, was presumed to be a shared experience that community members had in common, over which they could bond together. It was therefore both the *a priori* shared-ness as well as the *process* of sharing communal experiences, which was seen as a fundamental function of LGBT+ university spaces. Indeed, where many other university-based communities (advocacy groups, sports teams, discipline-based groups) might have concrete aims that *require* interaction, it is this more intangible interaction itself that is often the central aim of LGBT+ voluntary spaces. I therefore argue that the concept of Third Place (Oldenburg, 1999) may be helpful towards understanding LGBT+ university spaces: Third Place exactly describes those spaces which allow for participants to choose to participate in communal interaction, *without* the rigidity or sense of obligation that a tangible aim would introduce to these interactions. University LGBT+ communities therefore model a kinship structure that is an alternative to the biolegal family, in that their sense of belonging is engendered through the creation of a ‘community of strangers’.

2. *This communality is not an aspect of LGBT+ volunteering which is likely to be represented by the university.*

However, as much as this intangibility is valued by volunteers themselves, the exact value of this communal intangibility as well as the socio-political context which gives rise to it, is difficult to communicate as it has no clear linguistic or visual marker. Indeed, the depoliticisation and individualisation of LGBT+ communities has made it easy for neoliberal and/or for-profit endeavours to co-opt LGBT+ causes (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2007). Within Higher Education contexts specifically, there have been longstanding concerns around the ability to show diversity as a ‘happy’ project, something which can be used to add a bit of flavour to the institution, but should not expect to fundamentally change its function (Swan and Fox, 2010; Ahmed, 2012).

This selective institutional use of diversity became apparent through my analysis of universities’ student experience videos and universities’ EDI webpages. In these videos and webpages, LGBT+ communities were routinely presented as individualised, rather than collective endeavours. Both visually and in writing, LGBT+ university communities were only ever indexed as either a novelty to engage with, or entities that were completely integrated into the policy framework of the university. The ability of LGBT+ communities to destabilise, criticise, or run counter to the neoliberal institution, was not acknowledged or made visible in institutional discourses.

3. *It was important to volunteers that LGBT+ communities appeal to both familiarity and difference when attempting to reach new members.*

This collective counter-hegemonic quality of LGBT+ communities is often described as foundational to transformative action: the radically different perspectives of relationality and communality, can provide a blueprint for subverting normative/institutionalised communities and creating new ones (Muñoz, 2009). At the same time, scholars and activists have been sceptical of the potential for these radically different perspectives to be seen as part of an identitarian,

individualistic ‘non-performative’ (Ahmed, 2012) politics: the individual claiming of an LGBT+ identity may be used in lieu of actually enacting meaningful solidarities (Wiegman and Wilson, 2015; Cohen, 2019).

Volunteers were very nuanced in how they traced the performative link between the (re)presentation of their LGBT+ communities, and the potential of these communities to engage in meaningfully novel ways, rather than merely recreating normative divisions of in-groups and out-groups. Volunteers acknowledged the importance of signalling a form of commonality to other LGBT+ people, but differed in whether they saw this commonality as passively identitarian, or actively constructed *through* communal engagement. At the same time, volunteers argued that by building community on perceived commonality, there was a risk of homogenisation within the group. Furthermore, volunteers had to find creative ways of encoding their bids for commonality, as it was not always safe nor comfortable for participants to openly associate themselves with LGBT+ communities.

4. *Volunteers worked both within and against institutional values in creating their LGBT+ communities.*

It is this creativity in the face of seeming paradoxical or counterproductive working environments that forms the conceptual crux of my thesis: although volunteers work *within* educational institutions, the values on which neoliberal Higher Education is built, might on occasion need to be opposed in order to achieve the most rewarding LGBT+ spaces. Where success in the university might usually be encoded through overt visibility, fast outputs and exponentially growing attainment, my participants found value in organising in more quiet, slow, infrequent, and small-scale ways.

Vice versa, on an intra-community level, these desires to re-imagine communal terms of engagement might be a conceptual ideal. Yet this lack of formalised structure can also make volunteering a frustrating and exhausting endeavour, especially when the work that goes into this re-imagination is not intelligible to the institution (or even occasionally to other community participants) as valuable. This frustration and exhaustion might be felt particularly keenly by those who are in more need of these spaces in the first place.

Altogether, by tracing the various ways in which volunteers navigate the complexities they encounter, it is possible to explore both institutional and counter-institutional dynamics. I conclude that any intervention that aims to improve university life for LGBT+ students and staff, needs to take into account the multifacetedness of these dynamics, as well as looking at how these dynamics are entrenched structurally, and therefore require engagement beyond the individual level. Moreover, I argue that it is exactly the ability to work *with* dynamics that are in tension with each other, rather than trying to *solve* this tension, which makes LGBT+ volunteering such a fascinating topic of study and practice altogether.

1.6 Structure and outline of the thesis

The first part of this thesis will discuss the literature, theoretical approaches and methodological tools used for the research. Chapter 2 delves into previous research and literature on LGBT+ presence at university, outlining how these are affected by key developments in the English Higher Education sector, the English legal/social status of LGBT+ people, and the wider context of neoliberalism. In chapter 3, I will explain the methodological and ethical considerations involved in designing and conducting the research. I will also provide a detailed description of how I collected and analysed the interviews, focus groups, and university-authored materials.

The analytical chapters chart the progression from the process of becoming involved in LGBT+ volunteering, to conceptually reflecting on one's own involvement: chapter 4 is dedicated to exploring how my participants understood and narrated their own rationales for joining LGBT+ student and/or staff networks. Chapter 5 looks at how my participants conceptualised participation within LGBT+ volunteering, and how they subsequently critically evaluated the demographic make-up of their own communities. Chapter 6 concerns the creation of a 'diverse' institutional image as a promotional tactic utilised by the university, and a comparison to how my research participants experienced the indexing of 'diversity'. Finally, in chapter 7, I will explore how the ethos of many LGBT+ university communities can be seen as counter-institutional. My concluding chapter will focus on answering my research questions by examining how this counter-institutional approach can be translated into practice.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore the various legislative, social, and academic histories that form the background to my investigation of LGBT+ volunteering in English Higher Education. I will firstly give an insight into *where* I am conducting research, by giving an overview of how LGBT+ people have been researched in the context of Higher Education. I will complement this by noting how neoliberal political and economic discourses and practices have been internalised by Higher Education institutions, and become perpetuated through internal and external communication. In particular, I will focus on how neoliberal thought has become ‘stuck’ to ideas of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and what this means for a critical analysis of EDI related materials like the promotional material examined within this thesis.

My next step in this chapter is to delve into the question of *who* I am researching. As noted in chapter 1, I am researching intentional LGBT+ *communities*, rather than individual LGBT+ *people*. The term ‘LGBT+ community’ can index a variety of groups and a variety of people, depending on context, and can have highly emotive and politicised connotations. Throughout my thesis, I will analyse how this term is used and how these variable connotations are navigated by my participants. In order to analyse this, it is important to ascertain how, in public discourse, ‘LGBT+ community’ has come to have a seemingly-solidified meaning, referring to a seemingly-coherent group of people. I will trace the history of LGBT+ communities in England as initially forming in the face of societal and legislative exclusion of the nation-state. I will then argue that the increasing inclusion into this nation-state, now allows LGBT+ communities to wield the power of inclusion/exclusion from the state.

I will finish this section by reviewing some of the quantitative research done by academics and charity institutions on LGBT+ wellbeing (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic). In doing so, I will note the difficulties of quantifying LGBT+ community experiences altogether, as terminology and lived realities do not neatly map onto one another. I will therefore establish *how* I am conducting my research: I will argue that there are contemplations of LGBT+ communality and affect that can be best explored through the lens of Queer Theory, namely the particular ways that this field has conceptualised notions of success, kinship, and space. At the same time I will note some relevant critiques and shortcomings of the field, and how these can be addressed within my research. I will finish this chapter by explaining why, out of so many potential acronyms and labels, I decided to settle on 'LGBT+' as terminology to use.

2.2 Higher Education

2.2.1 LGBT+ people in Higher Education

Universities are frequently characterised as a space of exploration and/or identity affirmation for LGBT+ people. This is especially the case for young LGBT+ people who join the university as undergraduate students: away from home, young people can utilise the campus or university space as a place to experiment and connect to new networks through explorations of sex, sexuality, and identity, without the surveillance of parents or hometown acquaintances (Ellis, 2009; Yost and Gilmore, 2011; Kulick *et al.*, 2017). For some LGBT+ people, the image of the university as a space that facilitates liberatory and inclusive approaches to sexuality, is in fact foundational to their conceptualisation of the student experience (Falconer and Taylor, 2017, p. 6).

Much original research has therefore been done on what aspects of university life factor into the realisation of the university/campus as this explorative space. Interestingly, a large amount of this research seems to think of the university merely as the *location* where LGBT+ community can be fostered. As a result, there is ample research that concludes by giving recommendations on how to make changes *within* the university, for example by providing LGBT+ staff training and showing rainbow safe space stickers (Coulter and Rankin, 2020), actively recruiting LGBT+ students digitally, and answering questions about campus climate in dedicated chatrooms (Burleson, 2010), or by improving explicit pro-LGBT+ messaging on-campus (Vaccaro and Newman, 2016).

However, there is limited empirical writing which critically interrogates the university's role in both facilitating *and* delimiting the possibilities of LGBT+ community, and which might therefore suggest changes *to* the university. This leads to recommendations that only add or adapt aspects of the university, in order to increase participation and wellbeing among LGBT+ students. For instance, one UK-based study focused on LGBTQ student perceptions of their campuses, and noted that 86% of LGBTQ students did not think that it was worth reporting an incident of homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia in their institution (Grimwood, 2017, p. 143). Although in this study the problem is located in the university as a structure, it is also the university that is presumed to have the answers to *solve* these problems - recommendations from the study include awareness campaigns for staff, better communication towards students regarding the structures that allow them to report discrimination, and more/better data collection regarding student sexual orientation and gender identity.

This is far from the only study which provides recommendations that work from the assumption that universities are passive or neutral spaces at worst, and actors for positive change at best. Studies on 'campus belonging' or 'campus climate' among LGBT+ students (e.g. Yost and

Gilmore, 2011; Garvey and Rankin, 2015; Vaccaro and Newman, 2016; Garvey *et al.*, 2018), for instance, frequently identify knowledge gathering and knowledge sharing as a key strategy for engaging LGBT+ students in campus life, and minimising campus discrimination. In these studies, the university is the location at which discrimination takes place, but its institutional role is not considered integral to this discrimination. This is visible in the recommendations given, which are aimed at creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere for LGBT+ students at university: adaptations to curriculum readings to include scholarship by LGBT+ authors and the use of gender-inclusive language. Crucially, these are all recommendations that are down to individual or departmental actors *within* the university, rather than changes *to* the functioning of the university as an institution.

Of course, it makes sense that this research cannot always address problems at its root - much of the aforementioned research is quantitative in nature, and therefore more able to give an *overview* of student experiences, rather than necessarily tracing these experiences to their contextual origins. However, the unquestioned assumption that increasing LGBT+ university attendance and attainment is inherently a positive outcome, hides the very necessary discussion of how universities themselves are institutions that function through the creation and maintenance of hierarchical structures and exclusion of certain groups. This hierarchical function of the university is something which has been thoroughly discussed from a gender, race and class-based point of view (e.g. Arday and Mirza, 2018; Brim, 2020; Misra *et al.*, 2021). However, it is rarely addressed in research that primarily looks through an LGBT+ angle. In order to address this gap, instead of considering only how the university can be more *inclusive* of LGBT+ communities, I would like to incorporate a more norm-critical standpoint (Plotnikof *et al.*, 2022), that questions whether the university is something that LGBT+ communities should want to be taken up into at all - and if so, what is this inclusion predicated upon?

This necessitates taking an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989), acknowledging that while I may look from a *primarily* LGBT+ perspective, this should of course entail attention to the way that LGBT+ people are never *just* LGBT+, and can be both subject to and/or perpetuate forms of inequality outside of the sphere of gender and sexuality. More specifically, I will use critiques of queer neoliberal entrepreneurialism (which will be further explored in section 2.4), and its effect on the imagination of LGBT+ communities as middle-class, university educated, and white (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2007; Brim, 2020). I will apply this to the marketised institution of the university, to interrogate how academic LGBT+ spaces perpetuate and benefit from the image of LGBT+ communities as individualised rather than collective, passively non-politicised rather than critical, and only ever being bringers of positive affect.

There are some notable exceptions to the under-discussion of how universities structure themselves with/against LGBT+ people. These studies employ a similar connection between the theoretical and the empirical which I too aim to use: on one hand drawing on theoretical critiques of the university as a structuring force, while also collecting original data to examine people's experiences *within* these structures. An example is a 2020 study where researchers found that sexuality and gender diverse (SGD) staff and students did not think their university effectively tackled homophobic and transphobic discrimination (Ferfolja *et al.*, 2020). This then led to an underreporting of homophobic incidents, as those affected might consider the reporting process too intimidating or too pointless to go through, if the resulting action is deemed ineffective. This low reporting can then be taken up by an institution as evidence that exclusionary practices are not taking place at all - nobody is reporting homophobic harassment, so that must mean that it does not occur! Hereby a negative student view *of* the university can be transformed into a positive attribute *for* the university. The recommendation of the article is therefore that it is the university itself which needs to change and reflect proactivity in supporting

SGD staff and students, rather than recommending that staff or students themselves need to do something different.

Another study, on LGBT+ staff activism, found that it was often the university itself or academia as a career path that was identified as a boundary to staff addressing LGBT+ discrimination within their institutions (Messinger, 2011). The fear of being seen as a troublemaker, and the idea that activism could impede research and publishing, both impacted on staff's perception of their job security. A similarly critical view of staff activism in the university is given by a participant in a 2020 study on staff LGBT+ training:

> "People want it to be extremely simple. They want there to just be a two-hour workshop that I can run and suddenly everybody is the best LGBT champion alive. [...] [It's] problematic if no-one wants to have more complicated conversations about LGBT stakeholders and the support they need. (Calvard, O'Toole and Hardwick, 2020, p. 363)"

Here, it is a managerial and simplistic approach *within* and *of* the university that is being criticised. The training is not seen as a solution to, or long-term engagement with structural LGBT+ inequalities, but rather something to be ticked off a checklist.

Although, as mentioned above, the methodological and conceptual grounding of these studies is one that I would like to emulate, there is one angle to the exploration of LGBT+ university volunteering which has gone under-explored thus far. This is the framing of LGBT+ presence on campus *as communities*. Much research focuses on LGBT+ people as a demographic category in comparison to non-LGBT+ people, rather than looking at the bonds, cultures, and habits forged in these intentional communities. While this is understandable, especially in quantitative and/or intervention-based studies, it does mean that there is very little information about how

LGBT+ people interact *as a community*, both among each other and with the wider institution. Moreover, the framing of LGBT+ communities only as demographic minorities, also lends itself to reinforcing the prevalent thought that LGBT+ experiences and interactions are defined solely by risk, hardship, and victimhood (Formby, 2022).

This limited framing of what it means to embed oneself in intentional LGBT+ communities is surprising, given the fact that as of 2023 the vast majority of UK universities have some form of formalised LGBT+ student presence, and over half have an LGBT+ staff network. The very presence of these communities implies that the people in them derive some value or meaning from them, otherwise they would simply cease to exist. It is worthwhile then, trying to find out exactly what these values and meanings are, and how they are constructed by the people within these spaces.

Furthermore, the aforementioned studies were all conducted outside of the UK (with the exception of the Grimwood, Formby and Calvard *et al.* studies), and the vast majority of literature on LGBT+ people in Higher Education comes from the US. Given the rapidly-changing social and legal attitudes towards LGBT+ people worldwide, these studies cannot be generalised to the situation outside the respective countries in which they are conducted. This is in addition to the fact that England in particular has seen rapid developments in how Higher Education has been regarded, as well as how the sector has positioned itself within commercialised national and global discourses. This is what I will discuss in the following section.

2.2.2 Marketisation and competition

As much as Higher Education has traditionally been a place of refuge for LGBT+ people, this is not the only reason that I focus on university communities specifically. Higher Education in

England is currently at a very interesting point of development: more people than ever are applying to tertiary education in the UK (Bolton, 2023), a statistic which might give the impression that access and attainment within university education is also more egalitarian than ever. Yet there have been consistent worries that this is a system that is increasingly operating under a marketised logic. This logic affects both *what* universities are supposed to provide, as well as how (and to whom) access to this provision is delineated. This is perhaps most obviously visible in the process of justifying the introduction, and subsequent increase of tuition fees in England[4]. In the late 1990s, tuition fees were introduced with the argument that UK Higher Education needed to assert itself as a competitive sector, to ensure global excellence (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1997). This competitive streak was further cited in a governmental consultation that created the framework for tuition fee increases in 2012 and 2017 (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011).

This competition was part of a global change in university discourses, which also saw global ranking systems become more and more embedded in how universities presented and marketed themselves. This often unquestioned adherence to ranking systems, has raised concerns that the field of Higher Education might be homogenising, working towards elements of teaching, managing, and researching that do well in rankings, in its adaptation to competition on an international level (Hazelkorn, 2013, p. 22). This makes a high global ranking not simply a tool that measures 'quality', but also a goal which can be strategically attained through ticking the right boxes: the communication of quality supersedes the need for 'doing' this quality (Palmer, 2015, p. 133).

[4] Because education is a devolved matter in the UK, I am looking at England only, as the rest of the UK has seen a different trajectory with regards to the cost of education (see Brown and Carasso, 2013).

This competition is not just enacted on an institution-wide scale, but also trickles down to how the individual worker is treated, with states of precarious employment normalised, as well as the creation of internal hierarchies based on the presumed value of labour and value of certain disciplines over others (Meade, Kiely and O'Donovan, 2023). Furthermore, universities are not just in competition with each other, but also with alternative sources of knowledge-distribution: over the past two decades the internet has become a low-cost source of knowledge, including accredited courses. This development has meant that the university has found itself in a position where it needs to justify its continued existence and its rising cost. Out of this increased competitiveness, both *between* universities and alternative sources, *within* the running of the university, and *among* universities, has arisen the need for universities to not just be run like businesses, but also to market themselves as such. This is done through establishing a clear university 'brand', a holistic narrative that provides a specific discursive space and a distinctive *mythos* for the university (Wernick, 2006).

This *mythos* is firstly visible in the nebulous concept of the 'student experience'. Nigel Palmer argues that the student experience became central to the branding of universities, in response to the realisation that education is an investment where the returns are not immediately obvious, or indeed might not be obvious until several years after a degree has been completed (Palmer, 2015). University marketing efforts have therefore increasingly focused on tangible 'goods' attached to university life (e.g. activities or encounters), to have something that can be immediately provided and consumed on the point of transaction. A study on US college prospectuses suggests that this focus on the student experience expresses itself in a promotional emphasis on student life, like campus culture, extra-curricular activities and leisure, over details that inform about teaching and learning (Hartley and Morphew, 2008). In a study on university mission statements, the same researchers found that student demographics, values and interests were emphasised, not just to attract students of a similar disposition, but also to

appeal to potential investors and other financial stakeholders (Morphew and Hartley, 2006, p. 469). How a university presents itself, and which students it is purporting to cater to, therefore needs to be analysed critically as a marketised practice, rather than a mere reflection of how the university 'really' is.

In England in particular, university brands are highly stratified in generational terms, corresponding to when they were founded: the oldest universities being Oxford and Cambridge, and the latest 'generation' being the former polytechnics which were given degree-awarding status in 1992. As many universities were founded through acts of parliament that aimed to increase accessibility, there is a strong link between the exclusivity attached to a university's public image, and its age - essentially, the older the university, the more exclusive its studentship, and therefore the more prestigious its degrees. In response, younger universities have started asserting their university 'brand' as more critical of the status quo, more accepting of non-traditional routes into education, and more diverse in their student body (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett and Savani, 2009).

In particular the alleged rigour and prestige attached to courses from the self-appointed 'Russell Group' of universities (which contain no post-1992 universities and only one post-1960s[5] university) is a marketing label which speaks to the imagination very effectively (Hemsley-Brown, 2015). Indeed, in my own experience both teaching and studying at a Russell Group, the label gets thrown around a lot as if it is a self-evident proof of quality, or at the very least something that looks good on a CV. This is despite the Russell Group receiving criticism for the lack of objective measurements that underlie the claims of institutional excellence

[5] The Robbins Report in 1963 ushered in a new generation of universities, generally defined by the ethos that anyone who is capable, should be able to attend university. There was also a social aspect to this report, in that it argued that a higher level of university attainment would/should be in service of improving society as a whole (Lord Robbins, 1963; Beloff, 1968).

(Boliver, 2015, p. 623), and the fact that student satisfaction with teaching and learning is not significantly higher at Russell Group universities (Nurunnabi and Abdelhadi, 2019)[6].

Clearly, there are financial incentives for universities to be very careful about how they present themselves in public discourse, regardless of whether they attempt to affirm or subvert these taxonomies of education. And since these taxonomies are so caught up in the *type* of students they are expected to attract (including demographic 'type'), and the *type* of teaching staff they are expected to provide, the universities' promotional discourses also have a particular slant on topics of diversity and inclusion, and utilise these terms strategically to create their self-image. This strategic use will be explored in the following section.

2.2.3 Diversity work and the EDI machine

As institutions of education have been taken up more and more into neoliberal discourses, so too have issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion *within* these institutions. The initialism 'EDI' can be seen as a 'sticky' concept (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11), something which accumulates affective meaning and affective histories through repeated discursive circulation[7]. This complex layering of affective meaning, has subsequently led to much academic interest in both the strategic and experiential role of diversity work within neoliberalised institutions (e.g. Swan and Fox, 2010; Buckhardt *et al.*, 2016; Plotnikof *et al.*, 2022; Risberg and Corvellec, 2022). Of course, this holds particular relevance to LGBT+ volunteers - whether as subjects of EDI policy, working closely

[6] The latter is ironic, given the centrality of 'student voice' as a concept that supposedly allows students to make better, more informed choices about which university to attend. In practice, this process has been criticised as a de-politicised managerial feedback loop which creates students as a consumer class, separate from teaching and professional services staff as those who 'provide' education (see Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2014; Thiel, 2019; Young and Jerome, 2020; Raaper, Peruzzo and Westander, 2023).
[7] Of course, the accumulation of meaning in a sign may also simply be termed 'indexical' within more linguistic contexts (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006), and indexicality as a term will return in chapter 3. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I prefer 'sticky' as it communicates more clearly the messiness of affective circulation.

with diversity practitioners, or considering themselves diversity practitioners, engagement with these discourses is unavoidable.

One reason why diversity work is such an interesting concept to unpack, is that as a term it is not just sticky, but also incredibly slippery - diversity by its very nature only ever exists in relation to outside entities, rather than consistently meaning the same thing over time. This ever-changing nature means that the concept does not lend itself very well to auditing and assessment, even if paradoxically this is exactly the role that it is supposed to play within the neoliberal institution. Diversity work can only ever have context-dependent outcomes, and is therefore 'work without end' (Risberg and Corvellec, 2022). It is this slipperiness and endlessness that allows 'diversity' (or indeed 'equality' and 'inclusion') to be easily transformed into a promotional term, as its usage does not necessarily imply commitment to any policy or action at all. These differential aims and usages mean that even in discussions that argue for the continued relevance of diversity work, there is not always a consensus on what it is that this work does or what it should do - whether it should be a top-down or a bottom-up process, when it can be seen as resistance to the institution and when it is co-opted *by* the institution (Swan and Fox, 2010).

This can have a strong effect on the tone in which diversity is spoken about, as was found by the editors of the 2016 anthology *Transforming Understandings of Diversity in Higher Education*. They argue that 'diversity' has come to be seen by HE institutions as an objective to be achieved: 'diversity' becomes attached to problems around the barriers that constrain diversity *in* an institution, to the point where diversity *itself* becomes the problem. This conceptualisation is in contrast to the way the editors define 'diversity', which is as "basic and accepted element of our social and natural order" which cannot be *achieved* but merely *acknowledged and*

responded to (Buckhardt *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). Of course, the latter definition is much more celebratory in tone than the former.

Strategic use of these differential approaches to EDI is evident in outwardly-published university documents too, as one analysis of UK university equal opportunities statements argued. In this study, it was found that these statements interweave features of policy, memorandum, and promotional discourse genres (Tlili, 2007, p. 285). The universities were found to manage their outward communication by using language that appeals to as wide an audience as possible, similar to private sector communication, and with a high focus on 'achievement'. One consequence of this phrasing of the mission statements is that the focus on 'achievement' can blur lines between commitment, obligation and outcome: universities may phrase the *implementation* of equality and diversity policies in the language of achievement, rather than reporting on the *outcome* of these policies: the policy itself becomes a celebration of the university's commitment to diversity, before it has even had a chance to have an effect. Likewise, the study found that universities can use equal opportunities statements to discursively reverse causality of merit and opportunity (Tlili, 2007, p. 303): when the university is promoted as an institution where people are judged on merit rather than background, this then ascribes students' ability to enter into the university to an always-already intrinsically present *talent*, rather than a perhaps unequal distribution of *opportunity*. This allows universities to present themselves as neutral actors in a meritocratic system.

In Sara Ahmed's research on people employed within university diversity work, this reversal of causality is termed 'non-performativity' (Ahmed, 2012). In this research, Ahmed draws on JL Austin's conceptualisation of performative speech acts (Austin, 1962). Where performativity describes the ability of words to bring about changes in the world, non-performativity here describes the ability of words to *prevent* the world being changed. Ahmed describes the

possibility for universities to make strategic use of diversity indexes, *in order* to not have to make any institutional changes. For instance, the mere existence of an EDI policy can be used to argue that an institution is 'working on' EDI, regardless of whether this policy leads to any tangible results, or requires any actionable change in conduct. Here, the managerial use of EDI policies is not just unsuccessful in achieving any 'real' change, but can even be considered as a way of actively maintaining a conservative status quo.

I draw intensively from Ahmed's work, as a scholar who has built an academic niche of analysing the paradoxical nature of diversity work, and who considers how these paradoxes express themselves in everyday consequences for the people doing this work. For instance, Ahmed notes the ambivalent nature of the diversity worker with regards to their integration into an institution: the job of 'diversity worker' is dependent on diversity not being existent at the institution, while at the same time it is aimed at enabling this existence. Ahmed subsequently applies this analysis of the diversity worker as both inside and outside the institution, comparing it to her own role as a researcher. Both the diversity worker and the researcher provide a stranger's view of the university, allowing for certain processes to emerge that had previously been obscured, destabilising that which has previously been taken for granted. I will similarly examine LGBT+ voluntary communities as potentially destabilising forces, providing a counter-hegemonic view of how Higher Education is structured, as well as a utopian view of how it could/should be structured.

Where my research differs from Ahmed's, is in the employment status of my participants. While Ahmed looks specifically at people who are employed to be diversity practitioners, all my participants are volunteers, and might not even think of themselves as falling under the label of 'diversity practitioners', even if their everyday roles and responsibilities might be quite similar to those of Ahmed's participants. This distinction comes with particular implications: to what extent

do volunteers feel that it is part of their workload to make the university appear diverse or inclusive, when they are not formally contracted to represent the university in this way? To what extent can the lack of formal remits both restrict and open up possibilities for working within/against/for the university as an institution?

The notion of ‘passionate work’ (McRobbie, 2015) might be particularly fitting for a voluntary setting. Angela McRobbie uses this term to describe the creative sectors, where the erosion of workers’ rights is justified through the positioning of workers as staying with their craft for the ‘passion’ of it. I would argue that it is similarly useful in thinking about voluntary work, as from the outset it is clear to the volunteer that there will be no monetary reward from engaging in this kind of work, the expectation is that one does it because one cares about the community. This is particularly interesting given how often labour divisions or inequalities within universities specifically are seen to be down to individual choice, as accessibility and attainment become rearticulated through people ‘wanting’ to occupy certain positions (Deem and Morley, 2006). When working with(in) the power differentials that marginalised communities face on an everyday and an institutional level, to what extent are volunteers really ‘free’ to choose whether they take up/continue their work?

These complex layers of power, discourse, and interaction, mean that I will be working in the realm of several ambivalences. Firstly, student/staff status may locate someone *in* the university at the same time as their volunteering work might force them to appear as a stranger *to* the university. Secondly, the institutional appearance of LGBT+ communities may utilise indexes that do not *reflect* the everyday experience of community members and facilitators, as much as they *construct* them for an external audience. Thirdly, the responsibilities that come with taking up a role within a community may approximate that of waged work, but may at the same time not be formalised in a similar manner (i.e. through clear remits or job descriptions). It is my aim

to analyse how my participants experience and navigate these ambivalences, and how they make sense of their own position within these ambivalent spaces.

2.3 LGBT+ communities in the UK

2.3.1 Community formation through shared oppression

In keeping with researching LGBT+ people in the context of intentional *communities*, rather than treating 'LGBT+' as merely a demographic marker, it is important to consider how these communities have historically arisen as a strategic coalition in response to legislative and/or social marginalisation. I here use Benedict Anderson's phrasing of the nation-state as an 'imagined community' that is predicated on who is deemed to be *excluded* from it, as much as who is deemed to be included in it (Anderson, 1983). This inclusion and exclusion becomes reified through social and cultural norms (Hall, 2016, p. 58), which are continuously (re)iterated both when these norms are followed and rewarded, as well as when they are broken and punished. Any history of LGBT+ communities in England, cannot overlook the fact that LGBT+ people have often been considered a threat to the (re)production of this nation-state and the (re)production of these norms.

Indeed, LGBT+ identity has, epistemologically, been entangled with the public and legislative disavowal *of* this identity. Up until very recently, claims to non-normative sexualities were largely deemed 'real' only to the extent of their public knowability (Sedgwick, 1990). As this knowledge was immediately constructed as also a public transgression, the claiming, punishing, and containing of LGBT+ identity has discursively gone hand-in-hand with each other. This need to contain has had particular effects on the governance of education, as the knowledge of

sexuality and gender is one that is deemed inappropriate or dangerous to young people (Toft, Franklin and Langley, 2020).

The entanglement of nationhood, epistemology, education, and sexual identity was nowhere more clear than in the implementation of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. Section 28's prohibition of the "promot[ion of] the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (*Local Government Act 1988*, 1988), was passed against the backdrop of an emerging and rapidly worsening AIDS crisis, and mainstreamed discourses of sexual and gender deviance from the norm as not just individual preferences or oddities, but a 'lifestyle issue' that affected public health (Berridge and Strong, 1991, p. 154). Section 28 has been described as creating a panoptical effect (Edwards, Brown and Smith, 2016, p. 300). The uncertainty of what exactly 'promotion' entailed, created an atmosphere among teachers where it was common not to support LGBT+ pupils or challenge homophobic bullying (Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001, p. 139), not to discuss the existence of homosexuality altogether (Bell and Cumper, 2003, p. 218), or in the case of LGBT+ teachers, having to make up elaborate fictive lives, because disclosing one's identity was seen as endangering one's career (Edwards, Brown and Smith, 2016).

However, this situation of medical, educational, and societal exclusion also forcibly accelerated the creation and growth of gay and lesbian support networks *within* the educational sphere, which would go on to change the legislative status of LGBT+ people on a national level. For instance, the UK chapter of the Gay Liberation Front was founded by students and met at the London School of Economics (Murphy, 2023), and educational trade unions took the forefront in campaigning for the repeal of Section 28 (Cant and Hemmings, 2010). These unions represented the professions strongly affected by the prejudice that openly displaying one's lesbian or gay identity was likely to cause harm to children, or was likely to 'convert' them

(Purton, 2017, p. 41). Fittingly, it was the National Union of Teachers which exerted the pressure necessary for resistance against Section 28 by the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats (Robinson, 2007, p. 171).

It was also the implementation of Section 28 which led directly to the creation of Stonewall, Europe's largest LGBT+ rights organisation. Focusing specifically on legislative campaigning, and gathering party political support, the charity positions itself as having played a pivotal role in "helping achieve the equalisation of the age of consent, lifting the ban on LGB people serving in the military, securing legislation which allowed same-sex couples to adopt and the repeal of Section 28 […] [securing] partnerships and then same-sex marriage and [ensuring] that the recent Equality Act protected lesbian, gay and bi people in terms of goods and services" (Stonewall, 2015). Other organisations such as OutRage!, LGBT+ Switchboard and the London branch of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (*ACT UP London*) used more grassroots and community-led measures to achieve their goals (Power, 2010; Levine, 2020; Bishopsgate Institute, 2021; LGBT+ Switchboard, 2021; OutRage!, 2021). While some organisations worked with and through legal restrictions, or campaigned on the party political battlegrounds, other organisations chose to subvert or mock the procedures of legality and legal inclusion altogether.

Both the differentiating stances on whether LGBT+ communities *should* be integrated into state apparatuses, and the fact that (to a certain extent) LGBT+ communities *have* been integrated into state power, means that there is a plurality of interpretations of what LGBT+ communities are, and what they are not. Again, this is based as much on *inclusion* as on *exclusion* of certain groups. Indeed, Eleanor Formby, in her research on how LGBT+ people experience the concept of 'community', found that within one testimony, people may draw on both similarity and difference to construct this sensibility, constructing what she calls a 'solidarity without similarity' (Formby, 2017). Within my research, I will examine how and when participants construct and

navigate notions of similarity and difference, and what this can show about their relation (individually and as part of LGBT+ communities) to the university as an institution.

When I wrote the first draft of this chapter in 2021, the focus was going to be mainly about how LGBT+ communities have arrived at a seemingly pretty stable place in terms of legal parity and inclusion into the nation, as well as inclusion into (educational) institutions more broadly. I intended to argue that post-2013, with the legalisation of same-sex marriage, much LGBT+ activism has been aimed at changing social and interpersonal attitudes instead of pursuing legal and institutional changes. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case anymore, particularly in the case of trans legal protection. At the time of writing (late 2023) both the Conservative government and the Labour opposition have vocally denounced any attempt to reform the Gender Recognition Act, reforms which would allow for a less pathologising and less time-consuming route towards having one's transition legally recognised (*BBC News*, 2023). These reforms have consistently been opposed, under the assertion that to do otherwise would make public spaces less safe for women and girls. Indeed, the attempt by the Scottish parliament to make these changes in Scotland, was opposed by Westminster, in an act that undeniably positions English state/imperial power *against* the progression of trans inclusion (Crerar and Brooks, 2023).

Similarly, trans people and their allies are frequently posed as a threat to academic freedom and scientific integrity (Horbury and Yao, 2020). Research and teaching on LGBT+ topics are frequently attacked in public debates for not being rigorous or 'scientific' enough, while simultaneously (and paradoxically) being seen as the pursuit of an intellectual elite who baselessly affirm existing notions of quality and prestige (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Slater, 2023). Furthermore, outside of the academy calls to outlaw LGBT+ conversion therapy, as well

as inclusion of LGBT+ themes in school curricula have both been presented as an attack on freedom of religion (Ferguson, 2019; BBC News, 2021b).

These shifting views of how LGBT+ people relate to the nation and to institutions like the law, have also gone hand in hand with interactional effects on how LGBT+ people are treated. Although the following is purely anecdotal, it does serve to illustrate a rapid shift in the tone of the debate: I used to write articles and opinion pieces for an LGBT+ educational charity, between 2021 and 2023. Within this charity we were explicitly asked not to use particular kinds of language that may be deemed inflammatory, such as ‘TERF’ (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) or any other terminology which was likely to attract polarising debates. The reasoning was that young people trying to find supportive information about LGBT+ identities might come across these highly charged debates, and end up feeling worse about themselves than if they had not looked up any information at all. We were also asked not to talk about anything relating to sexual health or sexual practice, and to keep the pieces as positive in tone as possible to fit with the remit and purpose of the charity. When I started out, online responses were largely positive, aside from a couple of comments under each piece asking why it was necessary to talk about LGBT+ communities when there was already legal equality. However, within about a year, it had become commonplace to see comments accusing myself and the charity of grooming children, and calling volunteers paedophiles. The idea that LGBT+ people are an active threat to taken-for-granted institutions (the law, the nation, childhood, education) has clearly not yet left public discourse.

2.3.2 LGBT+ communities as subjects and agents of neoliberalism

Of course, that is not to say that LGBT+ communities are outside the law and the nation state altogether, and that there are no LGBT+ people who benefit from their positioning within these entities. And it is undeniable that LGBT+ people have become more included in institutional life,

be this the nation, the family, or the medical system: LGBT+ people in England now have the right to marry, to adopt, to serve in the military, and donate blood. Where LGBT+ identities were initially legally constituted as outside the ideal of proper citizenship, these identities have now been both acknowledged and incorporated (albeit very conditionally) as part of this very ideal. Indeed, this is how hegemony functions: not through brute force, but through the incorporation and consent of those groups which may question or destabilise it (Hall, 2016, p. 169). By recognising the presence of LGBT+ people as lawful, LGBT+ people have become incorporated into those narrow and potentially oppressive realms of subjecthood that are associated with (re)producing the future of a nation's population (Edelman, 2004, p. 4). LGBT+ people are now able to attain normative, hegemonic markers of happiness and contentment (Ahmed, 2010), and this incorporation into hegemony tends to be presented as hard fought for. However, if we should always be happy and grateful to 'have it all' this may effectively become an imperative that LGBT+ people *should* have it all (Rottenberg, 2017).

It is no surprise then, that the concepts of the nation-state and the family have consistently been models for the formation of LGBT+ communities. This is particularly notable in the use of the rainbow flag as a perceived symbol of unity, which at the same time is highly based on Western approaches to citizenship and visibility (Chiang and Wong, 2016; Klapeer and Laskar, 2018), as well as the popularisation of the term 'chosen family' or 'found family' to describe communities of LGBT+ people. Although these uses are not necessarily uncritical *copies* of these structures (as will be further discussed in section 2.4.4), the fact that this language and symbolism still speaks to the imagination, should provide cause for reflection.

Indeed, much of what constitutes 'community' or 'belonging' within the family and the nation-state, is based on (visual) similarity, and this fixation has transferred to LGBT+ communities as well. It is understandable that LGBT+ people may have developed visual codes

and delineated visual types to distinguish between who is ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ to interact with (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 23). At the same time, this ‘common sense’ of who belongs and who does not, can also work to deem certain bodies ‘out of place’, or ‘stranger’ to LGBT+ communities. This visual demarcation runs the risk of reinforcing hegemonic views on hierarchies of race, class, ability, and other forms of social stratification, creating a ‘somatic norm’ (Ahmed, 2000, p. 29; Puwar, 2004). This somatic norm may then delineate who is seen as belonging to a space, and who is seen as being in this space illegitimately, a ‘space invader’ (Puwar, 2004). Making oneself intelligible *as* LGBT+, to each other or to a state entity, does not necessarily work to challenge the parameters of intelligibility, belonging and legitimacy altogether, or who gets to decide upon these parameters.

In fact, merely replacing one somatic norm with another, can work to restrict what is seen as a legitimate expression of gender and sexuality at all (Butler, 2004, p. 115). Jasbir Puar argues that LGBT+ people are “folded into life” (Puar, 2007, p. 10) through the entry into the nation-state via the ability to serve in the military, to adopt, to marry - in short, the ability of participating fully in those aspects of citizenship that are considered (re)productive to the Western nation-state. This incorporation into the life-giving nation is not accessible to everyone: those with the highest amount of cultural, social and financial capital may ‘fit’ within the nation, to the exclusion of those who do not possess this capital, and are therefore seen to have always already failed the nation (Puar, 2007, p. 126; Ahmed, 2014, p. 159). Therefore Puar argues that, through attainment of certain legislative rights, LGBT+ communities can now be complicit in acts of structural violence, as well as being subject to them.

There have been various ways in which this complicity has expressed itself in the political sphere over the past few years. Firstly, the combination of portrayals of LGBT+ people as both metonymical representatives of the nation-state, *and* particularly at risk of violence, has made

these communities perfect fodder for the instatement or increase of border and surveillance regimes (Holzberg, Madörin and Pfeifer, 2021). In the aftermath of homophobic attacks for instance, it is not uncommon to see calls for more police protection and stricter hate crime legislation (Topping, 2020), even if this is to be enacted by a police force that is known to disproportionately enact violence on marginalised people (Francis, Welsh and Adesina, 2020; gov.uk, 2023) - *including* LGBT+ people themselves (Girardi, 2022).

However, it is not (just) that LGBT+ communities as a whole are willing to ally themselves with state power against other marginalised groups. This complicity has also meant that coalitions *among* LGBT+ people are not to be taken for granted (if they ever were). In particular, the increased calls to separate lesbian, gay and bi interest groups from trans interest groups is concerning. For instance, one of the most influential of these groups, *LGB Alliance*, has openly stated their opposition to including protection of trans people in a proposed ban on conversion therapy (BBC News, 2021a), instead arguing that transition itself could be considered a form of conversion therapy to "trans away the gay" (LGB Alliance, 2022), which has subsequently been affirmed in the House of Commons by the Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, Kemi Badenoch (see chapter 1). Altogether, LGBT+ communities in the UK are highly fractured, due to their precarious nature in relation to citizenship with/in the nation-state. While it is clearly not impossible to conceive of a country where LGBT+ communities are full, contributing members of society, there are necessary discussions to be had about who remains *excluded* from this society, and what it is that the community would be contributing *to.*

Lastly, in any discussion about the precarity and rapid changeability of LGBT+ communities, it is necessary to explore how these communities have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Early research on LGBT+ people's experiences during the pandemic notes several negative consequences, such as being confined to unsupportive home environments, and losing contact

with face-to-face LGBT+ communities outside the home (Salerno *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, early findings suggest that symptoms of depression and anxiety among LGBT+ people during the pandemic were worse among younger participants, including the age ranges that many students will fall into (Kneale and Bécares, 2020). It needs to be noted that even pre-pandemic, LGBT+ people were reported to have higher instances of disability, neurodivergence, chronic illness and mental health issues (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim and Barkan, 2012; Jackson-Perry, 2020). Looking towards the intersection of LGBT+ identity and mental/physical non-normativity, is therefore paramount to understanding the impact that the pandemic has had on LGBT+ communities.

On the other hand, research from both the UK and the US indicates that the pandemic was also a catalyst for the proliferation of grassroots approaches to mutual aid and collective care. As the pandemic forced people to come to terms with floundering or uncaring governmental responses, there was a turn towards movements that have historically relied on interpersonal rather than structural care, including LGBT+ organising (The Care Collective *et al.*, 2020; Chevée, 2022; Bender *et al.*, 2023). This was not a wholly surprising move, since LGBT+ activism and disability justice movements have long been intertwined with each other (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018), given that “people with disabilities are often understood as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or oversexual person with disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled (as ongoing medicalization of identity, similar to what people with disabilities more generally encounter, would suggest)” (McRuer, 2013, p. 373).

Yet at the same time, this historical link is not totalising: LGBT+ community spaces can and do of course reproduce normative, ableist assumptions about the body (Jowett and Peel, 2009; Toft, 2020). It makes sense then, that responses to the pandemic required much (re)negotiation of access, spatiality, and connection, within LGBT+ community groups. Part of my research

therefore concerns whether/how LGBT+ volunteers responded to the pandemic, and how this related to the ‘normal’ - were changes in accessibility and care structures only temporary in an attempt to gather ‘as normal’, or did they constitute a full overhaul of what the ‘normal’ way of gathering was in the first place?

2.3.3 Measuring LGBT+ communities

Over the course of conducting this research, and as a result of the aforementioned media wars surrounding trans women in particular, LGBT+ charities have released increasingly alarming reports about the extent to which LGBT+ people face daily difficulties. For instance, the disproportionately high number of LGBT+ young people who experience tension at home, at school, or in the workplace (Just Like Us, 2023a), the disproportionate amount of LGBT+ young people who are homeless as a result of their families not being accepting of their identities (Albert Kennedy Trust, 2023). This, combined with the hostile legislative and media landscape, explains the fact that the UK is plummeting in the ranking of most LGBT-friendly countries in Europe (ILGA Europe, 2023).

At the same time as these numbers seem to indicate that LGBT+ people are faced with ongoing challenges, it is also necessary to be slightly sceptical of research which is conducted by organisations that require a certain narrative about LGBT+ people in order to justify their existence as charities. This is especially so since the social aim of charities requires them to put these findings in language that is palatable to every stakeholder, from policy-makers who can influence the legislative sphere, to corporate partners, to people on the street who might be able to donate their money or volunteer their time to the cause. This means that the most circulated research is often quantitative, and findings are often presented without much context around methodology.

For instance, a report by charity *Just Like Us* found that out of the 3,695 young people (age 18-25) they surveyed, it was lesbians who were the most likely group of cisgender people to declare their allyship to trans people, at 96% (Just Like Us, 2023b). This was only a small finding as part of a much larger report, about one demographic's *self-reporting* of allyship, in one age group, in the UK, in a survey that was spread by an organisation that already presents itself as trans-inclusive (and therefore will likely attract social media followers who would also consider themselves trans-inclusive). However, the perceived novelty of a study that confirmed lesbian and trans *unity* rather than *hostility*, made this section of the report go particularly viral. After this statistic was mentioned in a video essay by the US-based content creator ContraPoints (*The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling | ContraPoints*, 2023), the notion that 'lesbians are the most trans-inclusive demographic' (without the caveat of the limitations of the survey), seems to have been taken up as received wisdom in certain areas of online debate.

As a lesbian who considers themself trans-inclusive, I welcome a counter-narrative to the assumption that lesbians and trans women should be in conflict with each other, or indeed that they are mutually exclusive categories at all. Nevertheless, it is concerning to see research being taken so out of its context. In particular, it is worrying that this statistic seems to have become so popular because it tells people something that they *want to be true*, because it says something flattering about a group they belong to (Van Dijk, 2011). It is understandable that charity research is done in a way that maximises social and mediatised impact, including playing on people's emotional responses. And it is similarly understandable that this often requires quantification of complex interpersonal dynamics: any research is subject to ideological decisions, but what makes statistics so much more powerful discursively, is the ability to hide these decisions in service of an output that is both headline-grabbing and seemingly objective.

For instance, identification with LGBT+ identities and/or communities relies largely on self-reporting into predefined categories, which means that all the slippery-ness of language trickles down to quantitative studies, even if they might seem to report on identification ‘objectively’ (Guyan, 2022). There is a constant tension between being pragmatic/strategic about collective language-use, and questioning the process of categorisation altogether. This is especially relevant when working with historically marginalised communities, since categorisation has a double function: firstly, it can imply a hierarchy. Through making someone intelligible as being in the minority in a particular space, their ‘strangerness’ can become amplified (Ahmed, 2000). Secondly, categorisation can function to establish the limits of intelligibility altogether. Someone who falls outside of the proposed categories, may become stigmatised exactly because their presence cannot be made intelligible (Douglas, 1966).

Exactly because I am interested in the contradictions and complexities of LGBT+ organising, I want to work from a presumption that any distinction between in-group and out-group is ideologically strategic, and *does* something in a narrative, creating rather than reflecting pre-discursive differences. Of course, there are quantitative and mixed-method methodologies that incorporate a reflexivity towards the categories in which they operate. Sumerau *et al.* for instance propose a way of delineating categories that includes a set of sliding scales used to comment on different aspects of attraction. This allows respondents to add more nuance to the experience of their identity, while the data can still be analysed quantitatively (Sumerau *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, Westbrook and Saperstein call for a difference in interpretation of quantitative data, for instance through charting variations in identification (on an individual or population scale) over time, rather than seeing discrepancies in identification as ‘wrong’ data that needs to

be cleaned up (Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015). Vice versa, there are of course ways to present qualitative research that can be just as impactful as hard numbers.[8]

My argument is therefore not that certain methods are inherently more or less useful to researching LGBT+ community experiences, but rather the need for suspicion in handling any methods at all. This suspicion includes a reflexive use of categorisation, ensuring that they do not become seen as ‘natural’, and a consideration of which narratives become easier or more comfortable to spread - even if they are comfortable *because* they are alarmist and therefore affirm what the reader presupposed was true. Although my exact methodology will be further explored in the next chapter, I want to lead with laying out the theoretical grounding in which it is rooted, regarding the relationship between identity, narrative, and measurements of ‘reality’. The next section will therefore be dedicated to discussing the intricacies of Queer Theory.

2.4 Queer Theory

2.4.1 Performativity

It is the aforementioned necessary suspicion of hard-and-fast distinctions that makes Queer Theory a useful framework within which to situate my research. As a field of study, Queer Theory has been less concerned with examining particular demographic groups of people who are minoritised from a gender and sexuality point of view. Instead, it has exactly interrogated how this minoritisation becomes enacted in the first place, and how these power relations are both dependent on, and constitutive of seemingly-stable ‘categories’ of people. I will specifically work with the post-structural framework of the relation between language, identity, and (speech)

[8] Although it might still be held to quantitative standards. An example of this is the interview-based government-commissioned report into conversion practices (Government Equalities Office, 2021). In a debate on the topic, this report was faulted by Baroness Noakes for only interviewing a ‘small sample’ of 30 people, and not containing a review of randomised control trials (Hansard, 2024).

acts as popularised by Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as well as writing on imagination, spatiality and failure by authors like Jack Halberstam, José Muñoz and Sara Ahmed.

Drawing on the concept of linguistic performativity (Austin, 1962), Butler famously conceptualised gender as being performative too (Butler, 1990). Gender, in Butler's conceptualisation, is constantly (re)instated in and through discourse which attaches gendered labels to particular acts. Vice versa, the same act can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the gendered language which is used to describe it. Butler was not the first in approaching gendered difference from a socio-cultural, rather than a biological point of view. Indeed, the terminology of gender as distinct from sex had become popular from the 1960s onwards. Sex here referred to the biological state of having particular observable sex characteristics, whereas gender was the socio-cultural role that was built upon these differences. However, Butler further rejected this dichotomy between nature and culture as distinct. Instead, they argued that the naming and announcing of 'biological' sex already *is* a cultural way of interpreting and categorising bodies (Butler, 1990, p. 9): by making the distinction between sexed bodies at all, we are implying that these distinctions are culturally relevant enough to name.

This cultural naming subsequently becomes seemingly naturalised through its reinstatement in repetition and reiteration: when we *act*, discursively, in a sense that is congruous with what we know 'woman' or 'man' to be, we (re)cite the acts of 'woman' and 'man' that have come before. However, this repetition has no pre-discursive point of origin – there is no stable *thing* which is being imitated (Butler, 1996, p. 85). Gendered identity, then, is something we *participate in* and which is *done to us* in and through language. This is equally so for identity around sexual orientation, as this is built around how one's own gender relates to (or is seen to relate to) the

gender of one's sexual and romantic object-choice, which is assumed to indicate particular characteristics of a person's very constitution (Sedgwick, 1990; Dyer, 2002).

This discursive view of gender and sexuality implies a need to interrogate gender and sexuality norms on a society or community level, rather than at the level of the individual - one cannot simply choose to 'opt out' of a discursive construct, after all. However, acknowledging that this is how gender and sexuality are socially and discursively constructed, is not the same as simply saying that therefore they are wholly stable or 'fixed' categories, in the way that some biological discourses might imply[9]. Indeed, Queer Theory is exactly concerned with the fact that links between acts, identities, and language can *never* be hermetically mapped onto each other, as who or what is perceived as appropriately 'woman-like' or 'man-like' changes over time, culture, and geographical location. Furthermore, these conventions are also continuously broken, expanded, or (mis/re)interpreted on an everyday basis.

Queer Theory, then, is concerned with finding the gaps between naming, experiencing, and enacting gendered and sexualised discourses (Turner, 2000): where is there room to reinterpret actions against the grain? Where can we see the instability of gender and sexuality categories more clearly? What are the mechanisms by which identity seems to become solidified, and can we challenge these mechanisms? I will take a similar approach to language and discourse, looking both at how collective/individualised identity-construction can create seemingly-stable categories, as well as looking at the moments where my participants challenge the stability of these categories.

[9] I say 'some' biological discourses, as there are voices within the biomedical sciences that also advocate for a view of sex and embodiment that goes beyond binary conceptualisations of male and female (for instance, Murphy, 2019).

2.4.2 Failure and utopia

In committing to seeing LGBT+ people as a group that is defined by discursive, rather than bio-essential construction, it is necessary to consider what different meanings become attached to this group, depending on who has been doing this construction, and against whom/what it is being constructed. As explored in the previous sections, the formation of LGBT+ communities has often been strategic, as a response to societal and legislative exclusion from the norm. This construction of queer people as 'other' has led to a cultural-linguistic investigation into the ways in which queer people become 'stuck' (but also have sometimes intentionally stuck themselves) to failure, refusal, or incapability of achieving and reproducing these unmarked norms.

Some authors have claimed this queer site of 'anti-normativity' as their own. They have argued that we should embrace the inability or unwillingness to reproduce norms, because what is reproduced through these norms, is (a derivative of) the heterosexual, nuclear family within the nation state (Edelman, 2004; Love, 2007). In other words: if we are going to be deemed aberrant or abnormal, we may as well own this identification, and make it part of our *self*-identification too. What is the point in desiring a concept that does not desire you back, a concept which creates itself in the image of disavowing you? Indeed, Lauren Berlant calls it a 'cruel optimism' which causes us to time and time again desire the supposedly life-giving structures (like the family, like marriage) which might be detrimental to us, or which do not desire us back (Berlant, 2011).

One way to avoid the cruelty of this optimism, seems to be by positioning oneself outside of this normative desire. Nevertheless, many queer theorists have argued against a simplistically pessimistic attachment to anti-normativity. It has been argued that this anti-normativity may disguise a reductive remnant of hegemonic, apolitical white masculinity, under the guise of

radical pessimism, particularly when this apoliticality centres itself around figures and concepts traditionally associated with women and with reproduction (Halberstam, 2011, p.118). In deeming notions of (for instance) care, birth, and childhood inherently un-queer, there is an elision of all the ways in which women, lesbians, and/or racialised minorities have provided alternative views on how to stand in critical opposition to the state *without* foregoing the need to think of the roles that care, reproduction, and pedagogy take in this critical opposition (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Lorde, 1984).

Similarly, the overt focus on rejection of norms as an individual, rather than collective practice, is simply an expression of neoliberal isolation in queerer language (Jagose, 2015, pp. 41–44). Indeed, it could be argued that the dichotomisation into normative life and normative happiness, as opposing queer annihilation and queer pessimism, is exactly a performative dichotomy. This then further reifies the alignment between normativity, life and happiness (Wiegman and Wilson, 2015). Furthermore, it is exactly the status of 'queer' as *inherently* anti-normative, that can deflect any investigation into the ways that queer people can become integral to sustaining norms that harm other people (Puar, 2007, p. 23; Cohen, 2019), as well as often implicitly working from the assumption that other axes of oppression (like race and class) are not equally worthy of critical investigation and deconstruction (Cohen, 2005).

Instead of accepting this dichotomy between 'the norm' and 'the queer anti-norm', the aforementioned theorists argue for utopian queer positionalities to be used to *open up* alternative ways of relating to and recognising one another, instead of dismissing a hopeful future as always already lost. For instance, E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen describe the constant 'breaking of habits' that they consider integral to Queer Theory, not as a lack, but exactly as a continuous 'becoming' (McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. 10) – implicitly creating the link to the future that might seem futile in more dogmatically anti-normative and

anti-reproductive writing. Similarly, José Muñoz' writing on utopianism holds that collective queer futures can and should be imagined beyond the neoliberal confines of individual, normative reproduction.

In my research, I too aim to open up possibilities for alternative ways of imagining pedagogies and imagining care. In this, it is necessary to note the turn towards 'low' epistemologies, those affective, seemingly-frivolous, seemingly non-rigorous aspects of investigation (Halberstam, 2005, p. 13, 2011, p. 31), in order to explore how liberatory forms of learning emerge via horizontal, rather than top-down dialogue. Here, I ground myself in the work of scholars on critical pedagogy and informal learning, specifically Paulo Freire and Janet Batsleer. While neither Freire nor Batsleer are typically classified as queer scholars, their views on pedagogy and its related entanglement with norms of age, authority, and trajectory, make for interesting interaction with Halberstam's 'low' epistemologies and Muñoz' utopianism. Firstly, I use Paulo Freire's rejection of the 'banking' model of education, where learners are mere receptacles of a teacher's knowledge (Freire, 1996). Instead, Freire advocates for a dialogical process, where teachers facilitate but do not *instruct* the exchange of knowledge, ensuring that learners engage with the world critically instead of simply mimicking the words of their teachers. Only in taking the process of domination out of the classroom, he argues, can teachers and students learn and work together against oppression.

Coming from a background in youth work, Janet Batsleer too argues for the value of informal learning as providing a particularly useful epistemological foundation for LGBT+ young people (Batsleer, 2008, p. 17, 2013, p. 80). Informal learning, in Batsleer's writing, is at its best when it is non-compulsory, dialogical, and not valued only through official forms of accreditation. By facilitating learning that focuses on the *process* of knowledge-exchange and interaction, rather than the outcome, it becomes possible to more freely question how learning happens in more

structured or formalised environments, such as the school curriculum but also in other pedagogical spaces like the family. This includes questioning taken-for-granted terminology, norms, and 'received wisdom' around gender and sexuality.

My conceptual grounding in critical pedagogical work necessarily requires a critical evaluation of the role that universities and research itself play in creating and upholding societal divisions, and indeed this informs a large part of my analysis. At the same time, I also acknowledge that I am exactly writing in this medium, and in these institutions. In the next section I will therefore discuss how a complex and/or contradictory relation to intellectual and physical space has been conceptualised by queer theorists, as well as being integral to the establishment of queer perspectives in the first place.

2.4.3 Queer places, queer paths

Given the instability that many LGBT+ people experience in family/home space, as well as professional space, those foundations of Western demarcation between public and private, it is no surprise that many accounts of LGBT+ life revolve around differential attitudes to places and movement. For instance, LGBT+ people's attachment to family space has been considered as alternately secure and insecure, with the home functioning both as a refuge from outside oppression, as well as a space where this oppression can originate (Schroeder, 2015). Similarly, the ephemerality with which LGBT+ ties are created and severed, outside the biolegal sphere, also extends to the spatial: spaces that were not built or created to serve LGBT+ people specifically, may be temporarily 'queered' when they are occupied by LGBT+ people (Vallerand, 2013). Although insecure, temporary, or inconsistent attachment are far from exclusive to LGBT+ communities, it is impossible to investigate LGBT+ places and movement *without* considering instability.

Ray Oldenburg's concept of 'Third Place' may help to structure this understanding of the unstable, the non-durable, and the ephemeral nature of LGBT+ spaces and LGBT+ paths. Third Places, in Oldenburg's conception, are gathering spots "where unrelated people relate" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 10), as a location away from home and the workplace. Examples may be bars, bookshops, and cafes. Within these spaces, the unrelated people do not necessarily become closely acquainted, but they become to some extent known to one another. Crucially, Third Places are places that one is not considered to have any contractual or moral obligations to, and that one can leave at will. In considering LGBT+ communities, we might be thinking about club nights, protests, occupations, or hobby groups as places where people might both consistently and temporarily converge and create connections. These spaces have consequently been thoroughly investigated for the particular ways in which they facilitate LGBT+ community (e.g. Newton, 1972; Muñoz, 2009; Bird, 2018; Jones, 2021; Lin, 2021).

However, there seems to be a gap in the literature when it comes to intentional LGBT+ spaces that are not leisure or purpose-driven[10]. As we will see, the question of what exactly it is LGBT+ spaces *do*, or what makes them coherently intelligible *as* a space, is a question that is also explicitly voiced by some of my participants, even as they create and facilitate these spaces. Where other spaces might have a clear purpose outside of the coming-together of LGBT+ people (to sing together, to dance together, to advocate for the interests of marginalised workers), exactly *why* participants continue to meet with one another in the first place is not always so clear-cut when it comes to university LGBT+ communities.

In thinking about why people might want to converge in(to) a space, it is important to not just consider static space, but also the motion that is created within/through/toward these spaces.

[10] By 'purpose-driven' I mean spaces of which the very existence is tied to a particular goal, such as campaigning groups aiming to get a specific law in place, or a group providing sexual health testing.

Sara Ahmed, for instance, utilises the urban design concept of ‘desire paths’. Desire paths here are the paths that are created when space-in-use diverges from space-as-envisioned. The paths that might be *prescribed* (for instance through paving or signage), can be challenged or circumvented, for instance by taking a shortcut over unpaved grass. She applies this to the forging of alternative life-routes which those who are non-normative to a society might need to engage in (Ahmed, 2006). These alternative routes may not seem like paths at all initially, but can become more established over time, as more and more people follow them. Ahmed argues that by living life differently (by not having children, not marrying, expressing sex and desire in non-conventional ways), LGBT+ communities can both create, follow, and affirm desire paths.

In my discussions with participants, I am interested in the extent to which LGBT+ volunteering communities can function as Third Places, places where one might feel ‘in community’ with someone without necessarily becoming friends or having extended interactions. Similarly, I am interested in the extent to which these communities both follow particular LGBT+ desire paths, or might even be interested in forging these paths.

2.4.4 Queer relationality, queer care

The configurations in which these alternative spaces and paths are forged, have been subject to much discussion, not least about what would be an appropriate naming practice. The terms ‘chosen family’, or ‘families of choice’, for example, have been used to describe the deep connections that are formed outside of biolegal ties. The term has been particularly helpful to address the need for expansion of care structures within spaces where biolegal ties are often seen as the normative first/paramount point of contact. Examples include elder care (Knauer, 2016), support with psychological stress (Soler *et al.*, 2018) and end-of-life care (Stinchcombe *et al.*, 2017).

Indeed, a seminal 1997 text on the subject by Kath Weston, took ‘Families We Choose’ as its title, although the appropriateness of this choice was itself discussed and problematised within the book. It noted how kinship terminology was used to imply a longevity, relevance and unconditionality that was not seen as guaranteed by the language of ‘mere’ friendship (Weston, 1997). The term ‘chosen family’ has even found a home in popular culture, as evidenced by the Rina Sawayama song that goes by this name, which was played at the closing ceremony of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (Sawayama, 2021).

On the other hand, these kinship terms have been criticised for continuing to take the (nuclear) biolegal family as a blueprint to model relations on and make alternative kinship structures legible (Braithwaite *et al.*, 2010), rather than simply valuing friends, acquaintances, and other intentional connections for what they are. The connotations of ‘family’ with a particular integration into civil life through, for instance, homeownership, cohabitation, or shared finances, reverberate into these criticisms (Edelman, 2004). The valuing of chosen relations could open up new ways of alienating ourselves from the taken-for-granted norms that families bring with them, and leave them open to more targeted criticism. However, this may be difficult if this is done with continuous reference to the family itself.

Furthermore, even the divide between biolegal and ‘chosen’ families itself has been criticised for being needlessly dichotomous. Kath Weston’s aforementioned investigation into lesbian and gay family structures includes a multitude of stories that see chosen family not as a greater or lesser substitute for, but rather as a parallel to (and in continuous conversation, conflict, and negotiation with) the biolegal family. The reality of biolegal ties, for many LGBT+ people, is much more complex than being either fully enjoyable or entirely oppressive (Weston, 1997; Pidduck, 2009; Huang, 2023). Even if it is not always clear exactly *how* LGBT+ communities position themselves with/against the conceptual family, it is obvious that ‘the family’ as a

notional, idealised source of care, holds much imaginative power in discussions around how LGBT+ communities can, should, and do conduct themselves in order to provide an equivalence to this care.

Indeed, throughout my thesis I will often be referring to ‘care’ and its relation to LGBT+ community-building. ‘Care’ is another term which, like ‘the family’ may seem to have a taken-for-granted meaning, but actually holds a complex position in LGBT+ communities. In writing about care, it is important to be aware of how ideas of ‘care’ circulate to maintain the status quo: the relegation of ‘care’ to the domestic, the female, or the subaltern, goes hand-in-hand with a devaluation of the process of caring in itself (Parreñas, 2000; Joseph, 2002, p. 70; Fine, 2010, p. 131). Similarly ‘caring for’ can become a way of instilling normative life paths and normative values, if any deviation of these paths risks invoking a retraction of care (Muñoz, 2009, p. 98; Ahmed, 2010): many LGBT+ people are familiar with advice that implores us to just tone it down a bit, conform a bit, don’t be so *obvious*, by someone who ‘cares’ about our wellbeing and seemingly just wants the best for us.

On top of examining these norm-affirming expressions of care, I will also be thinking of care as something that can be expansive and contrarian. Here, I will mainly be working with conceptualisations of care as put forward in the *Care Manifesto* (The Care Collective *et al.*, 2020). Written as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, the manifesto examines how care for some may mean exploitation of others, as well as how medical, emotional, and communal care have become individualised responsibilities under neoliberal UK and US governments. In response to this, the Collective calls for a broad and collective conceptualisation of care, outside of the realms of the for-profit marketplace. I will be considering this expansive notion of care from a specifically queer angle, and investigating how this care can be both facilitated and constrained by the university.

Exactly how LGBT+ people relate to and care for each other in intentional communities is a complex question, and this is partially reflected in the search for the right name to call these communal ties. As will become apparent, my research participants had vastly different experiences of how they related to others within their communities, societies, networks, groups and clubs. Some envisioned their relation horizontally as colleagues working together towards a common goal, some more vertically as having to take care of others, or being taken care of. I have decided upon calling my focus of investigation LGBT+ ‘communities’ as I feel that this word encompasses a wide variety of closeness and (perceived) obligation to others within the same community.

I want to note here that my intention is not to ‘resolve’ what these communities are, once and forever - whether they are more hierarchical, or more egalitarian, whether they are sources of care, or require more care than they can give back. It is exactly the ability to encompass contradictions and complexities that make university-based LGBT+ communities such interesting spaces to investigate, and any attempt to provide a definitive mapping of what they do or how they function, would inevitably fall short of the rich amount of experiences and activities that happen under the banner of ‘LGBT+ community’. It is the variedness of these experiences which I will draw out in my thesis, as well as how, when, and why some LGBT+ community experiences may become narratively privileged over others.

2.5 Language and terminology

In a study so interested in how my participants use language, it is important to reflect on the terminology that I use to describe this study, as naming can give us many clues to the nature of collective identity within spaces that deal with gender and sexuality (Ghaziani, 2011).

Furthermore, given the Queer Theoretical grounding of my research, it would be remiss not to question (or at least address) the categorisation or identity-(re)production that is implicit in choosing to use certain words over others.

Prior research on sexuality has consequently made use of a wide variety of terms and initialisms, and of course the specific language used can have an influence on what exactly it is that these researchers are looking at, and whether or not their data is relevant to (all of) my participants. For example, there are certain studies that use 'LGB', because they look explicitly at experiences of identity as relating to sexual orientation, while actively discounting transgender participants (Oswalt and Wyatt, 2011). Similarly, there are studies that look particularly at people who use 'queer' as a personal identifier, rather than an umbrella term (Calvard, O'Toole and Hardwick, 2020). I decided on 'LGBT+', as it is a recognisable initialism, favoured by educational unions like the National Union of Students and the University and Colleges Union, as well as nationwide charities campaigning for the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in education, such as *Diversity Role Models* and *Just Like Us*. It includes reference to both gender and sexuality minorities, unlike for instance 'LGB', and the use of the plus sign indicates that people do not have to identify as (strictly/solely) lesbian, gay, bi, or trans, as long as they consider themselves to fall under an umbrella of gender and sexuality minorities. Incidentally, since the rise of the LGB Alliance, the initialism 'LGB' has gained connotations of indexing explicitly transphobic thought.

If 'LGBT+' seems relatively undefined and open to individual interpretation, that is because it is. Taking again a post-structuralist approach to language, I consider any language or labels to only be meaningful in their cultural and linguistic contexts. Therefore, the way I use the label 'LGBT+' here is not to imply that there is a singular LGBT+ community, or that the component letters are transcendentally static identities, but rather that I am researching into a group that has formed a

strategic coalition on the basis of marginalisation around gender and/or sexual orientation. The fact that it is not totalising does not mean that it is useless and vice versa, neither does the fact that it is a useful term mean that I am wielding it as a totalising force.

I have been asked why I do not just use 'queer'. However, this term did not seem suitable, as its connotations are often explicitly political, anti-identitarian, confrontational, and often specifically tied to Western academic study of non-normative gender and sexuality (see section 2.4, *Queer Theory*). I did not want to go into the research with the assumption that these student and staff societies are necessarily in alignment with these politicised connotations. Similarly, I have been asked why I do not use a longer initialism like 'LGBTQIA+'. I agree that this could have been an option, but I decided to go for the shortest possible recognisable version of the initialism with the plus sign. Using 'LGBT+' rather than a longer term, seems to have had very little influence on recruitment, as there are many participants who do not (solely) identify as lesbian, gay, bi or trans. In short: I use 'LGBT+' despite its potential pitfalls, because I think it functions in the way I require the term to function.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the theoretical and practical considerations that went into conducting data collection and analysis. It will become clear that my practical experience of working within LGBT+ communities informed the decisions I made along the way. This is because, as discussed in the previous chapter, LGBT+ ways of creating and understanding relationality, has not just been a topic of research investigation, but also an epistemological concern. Experiences (both actual and imagined, feared and desired) of queer touch, intimacy, discomfort, and emotion have been used within feminist and queer writing to investigate the relations between oppression and kinship, how narratives of one can facilitate narratives of the other (Cvetkovich, 2003; Butler, 2004a; Singh, 2018). I will follow these epistemological footsteps in analysing my own narratives and those of my participants.

I am using the word ‘narrative’ here partially in a conceptual sense, to point out how emotions, while often understood to be ‘pure’ individual bodily expressions, are always informed by wider socio-political discourses, and can therefore also be a useful guide in inquiries about how seemingly-singular experiences are situated in relation to the contexts in which they arise (Butler, 1988; Hemmings, 2012). I am also using the word ‘narrative’ to think about form. The reason why much research on LGBT+ communities is done, is because many of us have a personal stake in it. To deny that would both be epistemologically dishonest, and ethically suspect: far from being a problem or shortcoming to be justified or excused, emotional situatedness as a researcher is a way of producing, managing, and analysing knowledge of a field (Coffey, 1999). Here too, the personal voice is not *just* personal or introspective, it is exactly

a charge against the presumption that a self-contained, boundaried experience is possible at all - attending to the ways in which someone experiences a social setting affectively, can be a way of attending to the circulating, moveable, amorphous experiences that structure these settings interpersonally too (Behar, 1996; Boon, 2018). I intend to use my participants' narratives and my own in exactly this way.

To honour this commitment to relationality, the initial research plan which I submitted to the ESRC in 2018 was originally devised with a more ethnographic approach. I would do fieldwork by going to university campuses and observing events and committee meetings, incorporating questions of how volunteering dynamics were facilitated and constricted by the physical space in which the organising took place. However, this became impossible due to COVID-19 restrictions. When I started my PhD in September 2020, I revised my plans to be fully remote and to conduct interviews and focus groups instead, as the UK went in and out of lockdown restrictions (see Institute For Government, 2021 for a timeline of restrictions). This shift from group observation/immersion to interview-based data meant having a stronger focus on how participants *narrate* their experiences of volunteering, rather than observing these experiences in action.

Due to the unpredictable and inconsistent nature of national and regional COVID-19 policy, I decided to continue with online data collection even after all formal restrictions had been lifted. This was partially because I wanted my data to be consistent (as opposed to some in-person interviews and some online ones), and partially to keep my participants and myself safe; after all, the reinstatement of lockdown restrictions tended to *follow* spikes in COVID-19 infection, rather than predate them, and I did not want to be responsible for further infections while restrictions were lifted. Furthermore, I noticed that some of the participants I interviewed later in the process had actually started their volunteering under lockdown conditions, so by collecting

data remotely I could actually gain an insight into the ‘spatial’ elements of their organising after all, as video calls *were* their online space - this will be further explored in section 5.4.

Despite not being able to do fieldwork in the traditional sense of the word, this ethnographic background is still evident in the study’s concern with looking into great depth at on-the-ground knowledges, how these knowledges circulate between and among group members, how these knowledges come to be expressed in terms of the in-group and the out-group, the familiar and the strange (Van Dijk, 2011a). In order to come close to these in-depth experiences while also maintaining COVID-19 safety, I decided to conduct online interviews and focus groups. In addition to these perspectives from the student/staff angle, I also wanted to see whether/how universities discursively constructed a particular image to be broadcast externally, to prospective students and staff members. Because of this, I decided to look at student experience videos and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) webpages, comparing them with the narratives that my participants provided. After I conducted all my interviews and focus groups and once COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted, I created a zine-making workshop for my participants, to give them the opportunity to meet face-to-face.

In this chapter I will firstly explain my epistemological grounding, using Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway, 1988). I will then relay how I set up and conducted the original data collection, as well as providing an overview of participant demographics. I will then go into the considerations of analysing this data into a coherent narrative. I will go on to explain the processes involved with collecting and analysing the student videos and EDI webpages. I will finish by noting some of the ethical considerations inherent to researching marginalised communities.

3.2 Situated knowledge

“Just because one can see reality only through representation, it does not follow that one does not see reality at all. Partial – selective, incomplete, from a point of view – vision of something is not no vision of it whatsoever.” (Dyer, 1993, p. 2)

As I have discussed in previous chapters, one of my concerns with research on LGBT+ communities lies in the ease with which certain approaches lend themselves to a flattening of experience and of narrative - hard numbers may give the impression of generalisability, even the researchers in question lay no claim to the representativeness of their study. Similarly, the presumption that there is such a thing as ‘an’ LGBT+ community or even ‘the’ LGBT+ community which can be measured and mapped, may overlook more complex or amorphous expressions of community, exactly through its very pre-determination of what community looks like. On the other hand, there is of course still a particular configuration of community that I am examining, which I expect to appear with some form of coherence, otherwise I would not have undertaken this research in the first place. Furthermore, this configuration is entangled with historical, cultural, and socio-political discourses which have a very real, material effect. Just because the societal oppression that a community faces is not *intrinsic* or *transcendental*, does not mean it is non-existent.

The question is then, how to study a community without reducing this community to a preconceived image? The answer, for this thesis at least, lies in the distinction between a considered partiality and reductionism. Indeed, poet and essayist Adrienne Rich argues that the desire for truth and understanding, does not need to mean that this understanding needs to be a metaphysical one, and that the search for transcendental truth might even be a misguided path of inquiry, noting that ““always” blots out what we really need to know: When, where, and under

what conditions has the statement been true?" (Rich, 1986, p. 171). Following Rich's interest in conditionality, I too argue that it is not particularly useful, interesting or even possible to know what LGBT+ university communities 'are', but that the use of studying these communities lies in what they tell us about the social, political, and cultural structures which gave rise to them, and in which they operate.

Donna Haraway similarly ascribes a certain level of responsibility and ownership to what she terms 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988). Locating herself outside of complete totalisation and complete relativism, Haraway argues that providing partial perspectives is the only way to avoid the trappings of intellectual passivity: either the passivity ascribed to the object to be studied, which becomes subservient to the 'master decoder' (ibid, p. 593) in totalising approaches, or the passivity ascribed to the interpreting subject in relativistic approaches, which may tend towards the equating of experience with straightforward truth. Situating one's knowledge is, in Haraway's view, the only way to acknowledge the active agency of both subject and object, as well as the only way to question how and when the boundary between subject and object are drawn altogether.

Acknowledging this agency is of course important under any circumstance, but particularly when working with historically marginalised communities. Too often, interaction with difference or marginalisation is a consumptive practice: by figuring that which is 'other' to us as passive or docile, its radical counter-hegemonic potential can be used strategically exactly to affirm hegemony, as something to be used up or instrumentalised for the benefit of those who keep difference in the margins. In bell hooks' writing, she terms these encounters instances of 'eating the other', interacting with difference in a way that constitutes one party as the active beneficiary of the commodified other (hooks, 2015). This 'eating' has important implications for the epistemology of marginalisation: to paraphrase feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, when we

position ourselves as not just *a* knowing subject but *the* knowing subject facing an unknowing 'other', we run the risk of presuming that the 'others' we examine exist solely within their ability 'to be looked at' (Mulvey, 1975). They become objects in the grammatical understanding of the word: to be acted upon by the subject, to change an intransitive process into a transitive one, maybe, but never active *in and of themselves*.

I will therefore not present my work as if it spontaneously emerged from an impartial, all-knowing perspective. Instead, I will be working from a reflexively situated position, using my intentionally 'partial vision' (alluded to in the Richard Dyer quote which opened this section) to investigate the communities my participants move in. I will therefore be interpreting my participant narratives not just as 'data out there', but as stories refracted through my own experiences, emotions, and attachments - experiences, emotions and attachments which have been shaped through years of involvement in similar communities. This situated, partial angle will express itself formally in the combination of original data analysis with discussions of art and literature, reminiscing on autobiographical memories, and personal evaluations of situations. Similarly, I might privilege the participants' accounts that evoke a strong emotional reaction in me - this does not necessarily mean the accounts that I am most in agreement with, or the ones that are most similar to mine. Indeed, many of the anecdotes stood out exactly because they were surprising to me. Furthermore, throughout the thesis I will spend time reflecting on what it meant for the research to be itself a relational event.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Pilot interviews

As I could not visit in-person community groups due to the pandemic, I decided to conduct one-to-one online interviews with current or former university-based LGBT+ volunteers via Microsoft Teams. I chose to conduct the interviews one-to-one, as my previous experience as a volunteer had taught me that getting a whole organising committee together can be near-impossible. This is partially because LGBT+ committee work tends to take a backseat to more obligationary activities (such as paid work or studies), and partially because it frequently happens that there is uncertainty around who exactly is ‘formally’ on the committee. This caused me to settle on one-to-one interviews.

I created an open-ended semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix I). Conducting the interview in this way allowed the participants to disclose as much or as little as they felt comfortable on a given topic, while also encouraging them to answer in a narrative form (rather than a mere yes or no). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews account for the possibility of being surprised by one’s participants, in allowing them to bring up topics or use vocabulary that I may not have come up with myself. This created a more dialogical relation between myself and my participants, allowing for active participant input in the realm of language-choice. I made the structure of the interview schedule flexible, with the inclusion and order of certain questions being contingent on where the conversation was heading (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017), but still ensuring I had enough questions to avoid awkward silences. I also wrote down potential prompts to use if I required more explanation or clarification on a topic.

In order to refine the interview schedule, I conducted three pilot studies. This allowed me to ensure that the interview length was appropriate, and to ensure that my questions were worded in such a way that participants understood what was being asked of them (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 538). Furthermore, the pilot interviews helped to familiarise myself with MSTeams to use as a platform for interviewing, and I could test the instructions for pre-interview tasks (reading and returning the consent form, answering preliminary questions) and make sure they were clear. I selected my pilot interview participants using convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, pp. 218–222), as this allowed me to choose people who I knew were involved in LGBT+ volunteering in HE, but did this too long ago to meet the inclusion criteria for the non-pilot interviews. I had previously volunteered alongside all of them. I initially contacted them informally via Facebook Messenger, to gauge interest. Then, when they agreed to be interviewed, I sent a more formal email containing an information sheet, a consent form, an MSTeams invite, and a list of preliminary demographic questions (Appendix II). None of the participants noted any confusion or disagreement with the information set out in the information sheet or the consent form, and the quick responses regarding the demographic questions seem to indicate that these questions were not too much of an imposition (privacy-wise or time-wise) on participants.

I changed the interview schedule during the pilot interviews, in response to the information that I felt was noticeably missing. My previous connection to the participants ended up being helpful here, as it allowed me to compare the interviews to casual conversations we had had prior, and consider how the interview setting influenced the way we spoke about our experiences. For instance, when transcribing the first pilot interview, I realised that we had not talked at all about the expectations that my interviewee had about the university they were going to attend. This was despite the fact that they had often told me in previous conversations that it was important for them to go to a university with a large and active LGBT+ community. In subsequent interview

schedules, I therefore made sure to include a question about the reputation of the university, and whether/how that influenced interviewee's decisions to attend or to teach at the university.

3.3.2 Interviews

In order to recruit participants for the interviews I used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Tolmie, Muijs and McAteer, 2011). I chose this type of sampling because my research is already focused on a very niche collection of communities, and having a more random type of sampling would have run the risk of resulting in too few participants altogether. Furthermore, as this is a qualitative study, I am less concerned with having a sample that is societally or demographically 'representative', either of England as a whole or of LGBT+ people at university specifically. Instead, I am more interested in considering how and when different circumstances and demographic markers can become foregrounded in the interview narratives.

Additionally, I had limited time and funding available to conduct the interviews, and because of this I could not afford to be too selective with my participant recruitment. I therefore aimed to recruit a demographically diverse selection of participants from a wide variety of universities, while at the same time not being prescriptive with what this demographic diversity entailed *exactly*. The move to researching online was useful in involving these different voices, as the research became more logistically accessible (Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016, p. 7): where, for logistical purposes, the scope of the research initially only included universities in the South East of England, I could now talk to participants from all over the country.

Initially I contacted participants by creating a list of all universities in England, and used a random number generator to pick the order in which to email their student network, staff network, and/or LGBT+ Students' Union officer. If the institution did not have up-to-date contact

details for any of these groups or individuals, I emailed the address listed for EDI enquiries. Emails consisted of a personal introduction, information about the research, and the research poster (Appendix III) for circulation in the networks. In addition to sending out the emails, participants were recruited through postings on my personal Twitter and Facebook accounts (including on LGBT+ Facebook groups I was a part of), as well as in dedicated WhatsApp groups. If participants responded that they were interested in participating, I sent them an email to schedule a time and date to have the interview, as well as sending over an information sheet and consent form, and the monitoring questions about their demographic identification. In these emails the participants were explicitly told that they were allowed to leave questions unanswered, or alternatively answer with as many or as few words as they would like to. Participants were given £10 online vouchers as a thank-you for their time and expertise.

Around halfway through recruitment, when it became clear which demographics might be overrepresented among participants, targeted recruiting was done to increase the amount of participants who self-identified as non-white, staff participants, and participants outside of London. For instance, I posted in WhatsApp groups specifically for LGBT+ People of Colour, to try and increase the amount of LGBT+ who did not self-identify as white. Here too, my prior embeddedness in LGBT+ volunteering communities (both inside and outside of academia) was an asset. I was already a part of many of these online groups, or at the very least knew people in most groups I posted in. My attempts to recruit for specific characteristics was therefore less likely to be seen as tokenistic or extractive, as I was clearly not there to simply observe (or indeed 'eat') marginalised people and then leave.

The interviews were conducted online via Teams, for COVID-19 safety reasons, and took between 25 and 70 minutes. I transcribed the interviews myself without using transcription software, as the slow, close involvement allowed me to start formulating themes as I went along

(Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017; Ahmed, 2021). I used the following transcription symbols, adapted from the symbols used in *Talk In Interaction* (Heritage and Clayman, 2010, p. 283-287):

(.)	Pause of less than one second
([number])	Pause of more than one second
[???]	Transcript is inaudible
Underline	Emphasis or stress
-	Word was cut off
?	Upward inflection
[Text in brackets]	Editorial change or note
[...]	Editorial omission
:	Previous sound is elongated

Although I used these symbols for the transcription, in the thesis these are occasionally left out when not analytically important. As this is not a linguistic or variationist study, I took the liberty to choose intelligibility over tonal accuracy, in order to make the quotes more readable and integrated with the text as a whole. A sample of transcribed and coded text is available in Appendix IV.

3.3.3 Focus groups

After conducting 19 one-to-one interviews, I contacted all participants again to ask if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up focus group session. These focus groups were an

opportunity for me to ask for clarification on certain topics that came up during the interviews, and to check whether my preliminary interpretations of interview data were broadly shared by the participants. Additionally, the focus groups required an even more explicit letting-go of my researcher authority, as participants were now responding to each other more than they were responding to me. This allowed for conversations to emerge which I maybe would not have been able to elicit by myself, as well as providing circumstances where I was not positioned as the sole 'leader' of the conversation.

Furthermore, previous research with LGBT+ people that utilised focus groups, found that it allowed participants to discuss sensitive, taboo, or simply unusual topics that they might not usually discuss in their daily lives (Schimanski and Treharne, 2019). Similarly, focus groups can be a way to allow LGBT+ people to think of their experiences not just as individualised, but as structured by collective societal positioning. This realisation can subsequently help formulate collective demands and/or refocus activist energies towards institutional, rather than personal issues (Toft, Franklin and Langley, 2020; Jarpe-Ratner *et al.*, 2021). The focus groups were therefore also an opportunity for participants to get to know each other, and strategise together. They are, effectively, exactly an example of the communal getting-together which I wanted to research in the first place, and ensured that my interaction with my participants was not solely individualised.

There was a slight drop-off in participation compared to the interviews, as some participants did not respond to the follow-up email, and some participants were unable to make any of the suggested dates. In the end, I conducted three focus groups (n=4, n=2, n=3 respectively, see the table in section 3.3.4 for the demographic makeup). The focus groups took between an hour and 80 minutes. At the beginning of each focus group session, I asked participants not to share any identifying information, or record any part of the session, to safeguard other participants'

privacy. I divided the questions for the focus groups into three sections: ‘communities’, ‘volunteering work’, and ‘emotion’ (see Appendix V for the interview schedule). This grouping was based on the preliminary narrative/analytical threads that I had started to create around the time of the focus groups.

Afterwards, I invited participants to leave their contact/social media details in a digital ‘guest book’ if they wanted, as some people had indicated they were interested in potential collaboration. This format was inspired by attending the 2022 Outside/rs Conference - the organisers of this conference noticed that online participation makes it difficult for people to engage in traditional networking, and therefore provided a digital alternative for everyone who wanted to stay in touch (Outside/rs Conference, 2022). The link to this guest book was sent out via a follow-up email, after the focus group had finished, to ensure that participants did not feel put on the spot or pressured into leaving identifying details during the call.

Where focus groups would usually be a space to look at more interactive uses of talk and vocabulary like turn-taking or interruptions, the online sphere made this difficult. Because of the way Teams processes audiovisual data, it was not possible to have overlapping talk, nor was it always easy to see who was responding to whom, unless people explicitly verbalised to whom they were referring. However, the focus groups still gave me a richer collection of data to analyse in total. As participants in the focus groups responded to each other, rather than just to me, the tone of the conversations was different to any that could have come about during one-to-one conversations (Wray and Bloomer, 2012, p. 177). As will be discussed in chapter 7, the focus group discussions had a much more critical tone to them than the one-to-one interviews, and participants actively exchanged tips and strategies in a way that would not have been possible through the interviews.

3.3.4 Participant information

In total, 19 people took part in one-to-one interviews, of which some also took part in focus group sessions. After all the interviews, I asked participants whether they were happy for me to assign them a pseudonym, or whether they wanted to choose one themselves. This was an active choice on my part, as assigning names without input at all felt inappropriate in a setting where many people may have had negative experiences of coercive labelling and coercive naming (Lahman, Thomas and Teman, 2023).

With the exception of Archie, all participants returned the demographic questionnaire beforehand, where I asked them to describe their identity in their own terms:

Name	University location	Staff or student	Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Focus group
Julian	North West	UG Student	White British	21	Trans Man	Queer	N/A
Veronique	London	PGR Student	White British	23	Cisgender(ish) woman	Lesbian	N/A
Scout	North West	UG Student	White	20	Nonbinary	Lesbian	N/A
Hui Ting	London	PGT Student	Malaysian Chinese	23	Cisgender	Queer	2
Feliks	London	UG / PGT / PGR Student	Polish	23	Cis or genderqueer	Bisexual	1
Moira	London	PS Staff	White British	24	Female	Bisexual / heteroflexible	N/A
Edward	London	PS Staff	White British	40	Cis man	Gay	N/A
Archie	South East	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1
Evie	North East	PGR Student / AT Staff	White British	27	Female	Bisexual	1
Orla	Multi-campus / online	PGT Student	British, White (Jewish)	24	Cisgender Woman	Lesbian	3
Alexa	Multi-campus / online	PGT Student	White - British (Scottish, to be specific!)	24	Female	Bisexual	N/A
Frankie	South West	AT Staff	White British	39	Female	Lesbian	3
Marcela	London	UG Student	White	19	Cisgender	Bisexual	N/A

Deirdre	North East	PGR Student	White	26	Cis-female	Bisexual	N/A
Suzie	South West	PS Staff	White	33	Cis Woman	Bisexual	N/A
Graham	North East	PS Staff	White English / British	50	Cis-male	Bisexual	2
Carmelita	London	UG Student / PS Staff	Filipino	24	Demigender	Gay	3
Crispin	London	PS Staff	Caucasian	30	Male	Gay	1
Johanna	South East	PS Staff	White British	58	Cis female	Lesbian	N/A

Table I - Participant demographics

Although, as mentioned before, I did not aim for a sample that was 'representative' demographically, there are some note-worthy limitations to the specific selection of participants I managed to recruit. Firstly, despite my efforts to intentionally recruit people of colour, the sample still contains mainly people who identify as white British. Similarly, although several people in the sample do not identify as cisgender, only one person explicitly identifies as trans, with a complete lack of trans women/transfeminine people in the sample. These are unfortunate features of the recruitment, especially given the particular challenges that trans people and racialised people face within both academia and LGBT+ communities.

As will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5, this lack of diversity along the lines of ethnicity and gender alignment can be explained partially through features of universities *and* research that create homogenised spaces: firstly, many participants noted that extracurricular/after-work activities at their universities were mostly white and cis spaces in the first place. As will become clear, it was exactly the whiteness and cisness of LGBT+ university communities that was often named as an obstacle in our conversations. It makes sense then, that the people who respond to a call for participation in research on these communities, would also be disproportionately white and cis. Secondly, even within LGBT+ spaces it can be easier to talk to someone who looks similar to you, and LGBT+ research is not exempt from this. It is, for instance, not lost on me that the two non-white participants are both South-East Asian, as am I. Several aspects of

identity were noticeably underrepresented in both my participant group and any explicit discussion, such as class and disability. I will explore potential explanations for this demographic silence in chapter 5.

The participants had a variety of different relationships to the university during the time of their volunteering, which could be broadly divided into Undergraduate (UG), Postgraduate Taught (PGT) and Postgraduate Research (PGR) students, and Professional Services (PS) and Academic/Teaching (AT) staff. To avoid identification, degree courses and exact job titles have been withheld. Some people continued volunteering even as their roles changed (Carmelita took on a staff role at her university after graduating, Filip stayed on for a Master's degree and a PhD), or had multiple roles at the same time (Evie taught while doing her PhD). Notably, among staff participants there were many more professional services staff than academic/teaching staff. In chapter 4 I will explore how this divide can be explained through the different expectations placed on professional services staff versus academic/teaching staff.

3.4 Analysing original data

3.4.1 Language and signification

As I am working with purposefully-elicited, rather than 'naturally occuring' data, I analysed my participants' narration on a whole-discourse level, instead of for instance at the level of utterance. In in-person focus groups I might have spent more time looking at formal features of communication, such as interruptions, byplay/sideplay (i.e. communication between a subset of people in a group that is subordinate to the group conversation, like hushed comments on the main conversation), or body language (Goffman, 1981).

However, due to the nature of online communication, this was not possible - participants were variously visible and not visible on screen, and sometimes had to turn their cameras off to preserve bandwidth. Furthermore, the filtering of overlapping sound on Microsoft Teams meant that only one person at a time could be heard speaking. I therefore focused more on how participants individually and collectively constructed narratives, and how these narratives changed depending on context - for instance, particular nuances were drawn out in group conversations that did not come up in one-to-one interviews, and the same terms ('community', 'the university') could refer to different people and entities, depending on the discussion in which they were used.

This interest in the situated and contextual use of language, both follows and informs my post-structural approach to language-use and identification (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Davis, 2008, p. 75). I am not looking for transcendental 'meaning' or 'truth' in participant speech, or claiming that I 'really' know what they are communicating at a higher level than participants are aware of themselves. Instead, my focus is on how my participants position themselves within particular situations, which taken-for-granted truths they embed themselves in to structure their narratives (Fairclough, 2003), as well as who or what it is that they position themselves *against*. I am particularly interested in the use/indexing of identities as communicative acts, and how these identities are malleable depending on context, while at the same time becoming solidified over time (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990). Indeed, Judith Butler argues that feminist thought, emotion and praxis have "often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone" (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Any investigation into narratives of community-formation therefore needs to see these narratives *both* in their individual and structural context at the same time.

This relation between the individual occurrence and the pattern is echoed in Kathleen Stewart's concept of 'bad examples': the notion that while patterns and their exemplaries have some relation to each other, these relationships are not always straightforward or temporally linear. This is especially so when researching the everyday, or that which has become ordinary and unremarkable within a particular context (Stewart, 2007). Patterns can come to exist in the ordinary, because of an assemblage of exemplaries, the recurring features of which 'stick' together into the experience of the ordinary - an exemplary by itself is therefore less of an *instance* of the pattern, and more a partial *constitution* of it.

'Bad examples' therefore also rarely fit neatly into a theoretical model, nor do they provide a theoretical understanding of the world that is water-tight. For this reason, too, I am not intending to make my findings seem like they cover the workings of any and all LGBT+ university communities - to try to draw such broad conclusions based on qualitative, in-depth conversations, would be highly intellectually and methodologically flawed (Small, 2009). Nor do I think this would be a particularly interesting or novel way of examining LGBT+ communities, given the vast amount of governmental and charity-based research that *is* devoted to conducting generalisable, large-scale studies. Instead, what I am creating through my research, is a portrait of a very specific subculture within a very specific setting, responding to very specific societal and legislative contexts. While this portrait does not provide a definitive model of LGBT+ communities, it does provide an insight into the questions and contemplations that may arise *within* these communities.

3.4.2 Coding and analysis

In order to code and analyse the data, I based my process on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's work on Thematic Analysis. I say 'code and analyse' here, because I do not see these as two dichotomous activities, but rather as processes that one moves in-between, neither fully

preceding the other (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In coding, I am working to structure the data for easier analysis and interpretation into a narrative. Vice versa, my analysis allows for more attention to exciting or unexpected aberrations to the narrative, which can then be made into codes.

It is because of this interrelatedness of coding and analysis, that it would be most accurate to call my process a mixture of inductive analysis and theory-driven analysis. Although I did not have a full coding book ready in advance of starting data collection and analysis, there were of course themes that I expected to see recurring - otherwise I would not have asked about them (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83). This made it all the more exciting when themes that I *expected* to occur were not very prevalent, or vice versa when themes that I had not yet thought of myself, recurred between/among participants.

I coded the transcripts in Nvivo, going through three cycles of Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Versus Coding (Saldaña, 2009). The Open Coding entailed familiarising myself with the data as a whole, and making note of interesting and recurring phrases or topics. I then sorted these into rudimentary, overarching themes, to get more of a grip on the potentially interesting narrative angles that this thesis could take, and to make the data more manageable. During Axial Coding, I refined the names, and started creating more specified sub-themes, in order to draw out how different parts of the data related to each other. This also involved moving or changing theme labels to more comprehensively create a coding structure that could more or less account for all sub-themes I identified. I refined the themes and sub-themes until I was satisfied that all sub-themes had found their ‘home’.

Then, as a third step, I went through all the data again to conduct Versus Coding. In this step, I looked specifically at how participants narrated certain concepts, people, or institutions as being

in opposition to each other. I decided to use this type of coding because, as discussed in the previous chapter, the term ‘LGBT+ community’ is incredibly nebulous, and can be discursively constructed as a group of people who are insiders or outsiders to particular institutions, including the university. It is therefore important how different groups, individuals, and stakeholders are defined as being ‘with’ or ‘against’ one another, as well as how participants use metalanguage to talk about their (collective or individual) identification with/against groups, how they both go along with and reject the narratives that are constructed about them.

Because these coding cycles were reflexive and iterative processes, I moved between cycles, letting the different ways/scales of looking inform one another (Saldaña, 2009). For instance, the theme ‘Stonewall’ was added in a very late process of Axial Coding. I only realised how many times the specific charity was mentioned *after* Versus Coding showed that several participants talked about their university in opposition to Stonewall - this prevalence will be further explored in chapter 6. This movement between scales also means a constant conversation between the micro and the macro: for instance, drawing connections between participants’ individual emphasis, juxtaposition and word-choice in their response to a question, and how this helps to construct a particular larger-scale understanding of certain concepts.

There are, of course, infinite amounts of parsing and structuring qualitative data analyses, as well as continuous choices to be made about what points of interest to include and exclude from a written thesis. In figuring out the narrative of this thesis, I decided to foreground those dynamics that I felt were most conceptually novel to the field, and the dynamics that I think I would have found most helpful to read about when I was starting out as a student volunteer. In constructing codes, themes, and the overall narrative of the thesis, I again paid attention to the role of emotion and affect - both how emotion was narrated within my participants’ stories, but also the stories which evoked the strongest emotional reactions in me as an analyst. I used the

moments at which emotion ran high to figure out the affective boundaries of the volunteer landscape: the conditions that caused someone to feel the *proudest* of their work, the committee dynamics that were the most *frustrating*, the most *joyful* interaction that I had with my participants, or that my participants had within their work.

I specifically considered the role of discomfort as an orienting emotion (Ahmed, 2006). Within my role as an analyst, discomfort with the data or the analysis might have indicated that there was something missing, or that my explanation of the data was not sufficient to account for everything my participants said. In many cases, my discomfort was an indication that I had tried to simplify a narrative which was actually more interesting through its complexity. The solution therefore was not to try and assuage the discomfort by trying to provide easy (but insufficient) answers, but rather to follow its trail. Within my participants' narratives, discomfort often emerged at the moment that value systems clashed, leaving participants with the task of having to carefully consider how to navigate this discomfort. These stories of discomfort were often also illustrative of the dynamics that stood in starkest contrast to how universities are figured as hubs of collective, progressive thought. In order to examine how these experiences of university spaces could be so different to the expectations of these spaces, I had to investigate some narratives of equality and diversity as provided by universities themselves, for contrast. In the next section, I will explain how I conducted this part of the investigation.

3.5 University-led narratives

3.5.1 Collecting the material

In addition to conducting and analysing interviews with LGBT+ volunteers, I also analysed how universities present themselves in student experience videos and Equality, Diversity and

Inclusion (EDI) webpages. To do so, I focus on materials by three different universities: the University of Sussex, Goldsmiths College, and King's College London. I chose to examine these videos and webpages, firstly because these are established genres in the Higher Education sector (Deem and Morley, 2006; Tlili, 2007; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019), and I therefore (correctly) assumed that all three universities would have materials that fit these genres, in order to compare and contrast them. I looked at three universities partially because these materials are so rich and layered, and can be analysed in so many multimodal ways, I had to limit my scope somehow. I chose the specific universities because they are the universities I attended, and I therefore have personal experience in navigating the public images of these universities, as well as knowing what it is that made me want to study at *these* institutions rather than others.

When I say 'genre' here, I use Norman Fairclough's definition of "specifically discoursal aspect of ways of acting and interacting in the course of social events [...] when we analyse a text or interaction in terms of genre, we are asking how it figures within and contributes to social action and interaction in social events" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 65). In fact, Fairclough has explicitly written about the genre conventions of Higher Education promotional material, and how these conventions have become closer and closer to the conventions of managerial discourses (Fairclough, 1995, p. 153). Fairclough here looks at the space between *meaning* and *effect*: what does the text purport to inform us about, and what is the everyday effect of the text on the reader? I will similarly investigate how university materials use genre in such a way that both presupposes and structures particular priorities in the audience it is addressing.

This is a further reason why I chose to analyse student experience videos and EDI statements: although they might describe the same institution, their aims and therefore their genre conventions are very different: student experience videos are often intended to promote university attendance in all aspects outside of the educational/professional sphere, and explicitly

emphasise all the ways in which universities are not just functional sites of instruction, but also social, affective and (of course) experiential places for students. EDI webpages on the other hand often work in the realm of policy and legal jargon, and may be of more interest to those *employed* by the university. In considering how genre can create a different *effect* even if the *meaning* is purportedly the same (i.e. presenting a 'factual' informative account of the university), can open up discussions of how the university can be a site of contrasting and contradictory discourses.

Some universities had multiple webpages and videos that could have been included in the analysis. I chose the specific materials that I am analysing, based on their inclusion of references to equality/diversity in general, or gender/sexuality in particular, as well as how easy they are to find from the university's homepage - i.e. when navigating from the university's main webpage, would a prospective student/staff member for whom LGBT+ inclusion matters, be able to quickly come across these materials (Lewin-Jones, 2019, p. 215).

3.5.2 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

The videos and webpages were pre-existing material, rather than specifically elicited for my thesis, and furthermore were in a different format than the interview and focus group transcripts. Because of this, I needed to apply a different mode of analysis to make sense of the discourses present, compared to the interviews and focus groups. I therefore conducted a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), looking specifically at assertions and elisions of power within the materials.

As the name suggests, MCDA is a type of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It has the same critical underpinnings as CDA - its objective being the investigation of circulation and (re)construction of power in and through discourse, while keeping an eye to the socio-political

and historical contexts that give rise to these discourses, as well as the trajectory of their production (Fairclough, 1995). It is therefore particularly suitable for the analysis of material written on behalf of institutions, or material that is embedded in policy and legislative frameworks. This approach allows for a norm-critical view of institutional life, as it exactly functions to examine how certain institutional discourses come to be seen as normal or natural (Plotnikof *et al.*, 2022). However, where CDA privileges written and spoken texts, MCDA understands meaning as arising from communication in/among several mediums. Multimodal aspects of meaning-making have received increased attention with the emergence of the internet, which is more obviously multimodal than 'offline' texts (Van Dijk, 2011b, p. 20).

This multimodal form of communication is particularly important when it comes to investigating truth claims, as images or videos can seem to capture life 'as it really is' much more easily than written text (Ehrlich, 2019, p. 255). Especially in institutional discourses, which often cannot be traced back to a singular author, the truth claims presented might become naturalised to the point of seeming unquestionable. Indeed, MCDA scholars often focus on the use of visual metaphors, allegories, analogy or metonyms and how these visuals have come to be seen as 'naturally' standing in for that which they represent (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 8). This is relevant specifically for texts that have a promotional purpose, as all advertising is reliant on a process of naturalisation of certain desires within the audience. The most effective advertising is that which hides its promotional nature, convincing the audience that they are not being duped into consumption, but are rather agentic figures who always already wanted the product of their own volition (Buckingham, 2011, p. 31).

At the same time, it is important for analysts using MCDA approaches not to fall into the same trap of naturalising their own analysis into a stable, unquestionable truth. Many MCDA scholars therefore make it explicit that they are not aiming to uncover the 'meaning' of a multimodal text,

but rather its ‘meaning potential’ (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 9; Machin, 2016, p. 9). This refers to the interpretation of a text that is available to a viewer, using contextually-available tools. It is the job of the analyst to make clear what these tools are.

It is also important to focus on this ‘potential’ from an LGBT+ perspective, because of its long history of indexical, rather than explicit identity construction in mass communication: by ‘indexical’ I mean the ability to align oneself with a particular group, through the use of communicative signifiers traditionally associated with these groups (Da Fina, 2011; Rampton, Maybin and Roberts, 2015). These can be highly linguistic signifiers, like particular ways of intoning or particular word-choice, but they can also be visual - for instance dressing or moving in particular ways. While indexical forms of identity formation and identity communication are of course not exclusive to LGBT+ communities, the stigmatised nature of LGBT+ identification across cultures has meant that overt communication has not always been possible or legal: much of the commonality between the textual LGBT+ subject and LGBT+ interpreter, has been communicated implicitly through gesture, implication, or a glance (Whatling, 1997, pp. 1–10).

While indexicality may work well in entertainment media, it is problematic in the context of promotional discourses. In the Western world spoken and written language are the privileged mediums through which to propel something into overt, shared meaning, and it is therefore the medium through which promises and guarantees are made (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 35). When the presence of a particular community at a university is asserted in modes other than spoken or written language, this cannot be taken up as an explicit promise or a guarantee of a university’s intentions regarding this community. This difference between overt naming of university LGBT+ communities versus indexical reference, will feature distinctly in my analysis. In particular, I will focus on the non-performative element of indexical community assertion - the

ability of universities to index the presence LGBT+ community *in order* not to have to make explicit whether/how they will facilitate the existence and wellbeing of this community.

In collecting and analysing both original data and pre-existing material, I aim to sketch an image of how (re)presentations of the university relate to participants' experiences of the university. If the self-representations have a straightforward one-to-one relation to how the university is seen by LGBT+ volunteers, then these materials can tell us a lot about what LGBT+ volunteering life is like. If there is a gap between the image of the university and the experience, it is important to uncover how this gap has come to exist, what this gap consists of, and who benefits from it.

3.6 Ethical considerations

When I was an undergraduate volunteer with my university's LGBT+ society, we received constant requests for research participation. This got to the point where we informally agreed to stop forwarding these requests to our members, or responding to them at all. At the time, our reasoning was that students came to the society to be in a space where being LGBT+ was the norm, whereas many of the research requests wanted to inquire about the difficulties and marginality that LGBT+ students face. Furthermore, we were suspicious of many researchers' motivations: the requests were never from people who had any actual involvement in the society, or indeed in LGBT+ campus life at all, as far as we knew. We did not want ourselves and our members to be treated as a resource to extract data from, only to then be discarded by those who had no stakes in our work anyway, having had no input in how the data is interpreted, or how the research is used. This is not to say that we assumed these researchers to have bad intentions. It is simply to acknowledge that even well-intentioned research (especially when conducted with marginalised communities) can gloss over the fact that we are researching real

people, whose experiences are not just narratives to be abstracted, but are in fact an everyday reality that does not cease to exist once the data collection is over (Chicago Beyond, 2019).

This personal experience of being on the receiving end of research requests, informed my approach to ethics in my own research as well. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the King's Research Ethics Office, in February 2021. Although I did not ask explicitly about trauma or negative experiences related to LGBT+ volunteering or LGBT+ identity, from personal experience I do know that it is common for these topics to be discussed within LGBT+ volunteering communities, and might therefore come up during the interviews and focus groups. Furthermore, simply by virtue of being a researcher, I had a certain level of power during the conversation (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 162), which I was worried might make participants feel like they needed to disclose more than they would have actually felt comfortable discussing. Because of this, I reminded participants before the interview that they were able to pause or stop the recording at any moment, without any need for justification. I also kept a list of resources and organisations to hand for the participants to be signposted to, in case their participation in the research caused them any distress. Fortunately, it was not necessary to use this during any of the interviews.

Exactly because I was concerned about perpetuating an extractive approach to research, and to acknowledge that the conclusions of my research would likely not be of immediately applicable use to my participants, I put some interventions in place to hopefully make the research more enjoyable and directly beneficial to my participants. For instance, it was the reason for providing a small financial incentive for participation in the interviews and the focus groups, to show that I appreciated that people took time out of their day to help me with a project, and that their experiences are a form of expertise that should be valued by those who benefit from it.

Furthermore, I made the choice to include focus groups after many participants brought up that sharing their experiences with others was part of the joy of their communities. The focus groups therefore functioned not merely as a place to gather data, but also as a place to create connections (hence also the option to stay in touch via the guest book at the end). Additionally, the focus groups simply allowed me to have more time with my participants, and to open up the possibility for longer-term engagement as opposed to one-off interaction. Les Back and Nirmal Puwar, in their *Manifesto for Live Methods*, argue that the ability to spend more time with our research and with our participants, can be a powerful way to reject the rush towards output that the neoliberal university generally demands (Back and Puwar, 2012).

Lastly, I set up a zine workshop for my participants, to create and share knowledge in a creative, low-stakes way. Zines are “self-published, low-budget, non-profit print publications” (French and Curd, 2022), which usually celebrate and intentionally emulate low art, do-it-yourself aesthetics (Hroch, 2020). Zines form an accessible and minimal-cost alternative to more established archives. They often emphasise communal creation over more traditional models of knowledge production and dissemination (Robinson, 2018). In zine-making there is often as much of a focus on how the process of creation can be generative and pleasant for those participating, as there is on the final product (Baker and Cantillon, 2022), and fittingly, it was this process of participatory co-creation that I was interested in providing for my participants.

The idea of setting up the zine workshop emerged throughout the process of conducting the focus groups. I realised that participants had a lot to share with each other, and this might be done better in a more casual, face-to-face environment. As such, the zine making did not form part of the official data collection from the outset, and I will not analyse the zine as primary data. I also chose not to analyse the zine to keep the experience of the workshop casual. Even if my analysis would not have involved an *evaluation* of my participants’ artistic practice, I did not

want them to feel like their creative work was being meticulously examined. Nevertheless, despite the zines themselves not being the focus of my analysis, I will come back to the importance of setting up and facilitating the workshop in the conclusion to this thesis.

Altogether, much of my methodological and ethical decision-making has come from a desire to make the form of my research match the conceptual content which I am discussing - content which itself was informed by my past experiences as an LGBT+ university volunteer. This means that throughout the thesis I occupy a multi-layered position: as a past volunteer looking back on my own experiences, as a researcher collecting and analysing volunteering, and as a facilitator of new communal interactions through the research process. Being able to weave between these positions and integrate them into a coherent narrative has not only allowed for a highly-reflexive and in-depth exploration of LGBT+ community dynamics, it has also been the catalyst for incredibly rewarding and joyful interactions.

Chapter 4 - Carving out space: strangeness and familiarity in LGBT+ spaces

4.1 Introduction

Growing up in a town near the Dutch Bible belt, social surveillance was the norm for much of my life. Surveillance as a consequence of a culture of assimilationism but also, in a more basal way, a feature of living in a place that is small enough for everyday activities to be observed, whether intentional or not. A trip to the town centre would mean inevitable meetings with classmates, neighbours, friends and acquaintances. Being surrounded by the same people from primary school to secondary school, from part-time jobs to leisure activities, gives very little space to encounter the unfamiliar.

Sara Ahmed describes the notion of comfort as telling us something “about an encounter between bodies and worlds, the promise of a ‘‘sinking’’ feeling” (Ahmed, 2012, p.39), like one might have in a comfortable chair. When you encounter a world that is made to accommodate your body, familiarity can become comfort. If your body is at odds with the world around it, familiarity can be a constant reminder of one’s ill-fittingness. Yet at the same time, carving out a new space in the world, one that perhaps meets you more comfortably, can also feel incredibly uncomfortable as a process - we only need to note the friction inherent to the metaphor ‘carve’ to understand how much the diversion from a perceived straight, well-trodden path (Ahmed, 2006, p.20), can be experienced as an exhausting and often painful effort.

Needless to say, I did not explore my own sexuality and gender identity much while I lived at home. Having to constantly position myself as a stranger to my surroundings, without having a

sense of what an alternative might look like, seemed not worth the carving it would take. It seems odd, then, that at every university I have attended after moving away, I have aimed to cultivate exactly such a small and interconnected community, through my participation in LGBT+ volunteering. Part of the rationale for starting this research was out of a confused observation of my own relation to familiarity and strangeness - I still turn up to academic LGBT+ events, uneasy when I see the same familiar faces again and again. Yet I feel even more disheartened and out-of-place when I show up to an event and realise I do not know anyone. This push-and-pull of anxiety, joy, and frustration at the contradictions of seeing/being-seen-by friends and acquaintances, seems to point towards a tension of what familiarity and strangeness *do* in social settings, and how these feelings are cultivated interpersonally over time.

This short biography is of course far from universally applicable, or even applicable to any of my participants, as none of them share my experience of growing up in a small Dutch town, and the specific effect this had on my self-image and subsequent coming-out journey. My participants largely grew up in the UK, some in small towns and some in big cities. Some of my participants were not out until years after they had started university, some of my participants were out before their university life had even started. Both my experiences and those of my participants nevertheless go some way towards explaining why this chapter is concerned with the reasons that LGBT+ volunteers in Higher Education start their journey of creating a community alongside people that they might not have that much in common with, initially, aside from maybe a shared identification under the broad umbrella of 'LGBT+' - itself already a label that can describe a wide variety of experiences and identities. There is clearly something about the concept of a 'community' that seems coherent enough that people use it as a basis around which to organise. Furthermore, there is something alluring about this notion of 'community' that means that people around the country organise around it *voluntarily*.

In short, I am interested in what draws people to join or create intentional LGBT+ volunteering communities. This is explored through questions of individual and communal epistemologies, what it means to feel like one *knows* the people with whom one shares a community, and what it feels like to *be known* in turn. Furthermore, I examine how this tension between self and other (because of course, self-image is never really 'of' itself, but rather always contingent on how we are expected to look/be looked at (Butler, 2004)), between the strange and the familial, is influenced by, and itself influences the institutional and communal spaces we find ourselves in. I will explore this tension by considering how and why people start participating in LGBT+ volunteering, exactly from the assumption that questions of familiarity and difference structure when, why, and how people become involved in these spaces.

I will firstly investigate how university LGBT+ communities are narratively constructed as (spatially and emotionally) *chosen* spaces, in opposition to for instance the family home or the hometown. Using Ray Oldenburg's concept of 'Third Place', I will argue that these chosen spaces are contingent on a greater sense of control regarding strangeness and familiarity (Oldenburg, 1999). I will subsequently use Judith Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1990) to explore how this relation to strangeness and familiarity in the form of a community is (re)iteratively created into a seemingly-stable 'something'. I will combine this with the use of Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983) in order to discuss participants' narration of sharing strange and familial experiences, as key to imagining themselves to be 'in community' with others. I will conclude by discussing participants' determination to give new people in their LGBT+ communities 'something' (a sense of belonging, an easier way to navigate bureaucracy, language to describe one's identity) that they did not have themselves when they joined the institution.

Altogether, I am arguing that in fostering these new routes from the strange to the familial, LGBT+ volunteers can make the carving-out of new communities a less arduous process for their new community members. I also argue that this fostering is not necessarily teleologically aiming towards (or resulting from) a desire of anything in particular, but rather that they can often be employed to reach a space of uncertainty, a 'something' that is neither fully defined nor wholly up in the air.

4.2 Home and the family

In this section I will explore how my participants narrated the concepts of the family and the home. Many participants showed an awareness of the family/home as often unsupportive, or unreliable/inconsistent in terms of support for LGBT+ people, even if this did not necessarily apply to participants' own family/homes. However, the extent to which the university LGBT+ community can/should be seen as an *alternative* to the family/home, was debated. Using Ray Oldenburg's concept of 'Third Place', I analyse how a key difference between voluntary LGBT+ communities and the family/home lies exactly in the ability to *voluntarily* enter and leave community spaces. At the same time, I note that there are circumstances that can stop the attachment to LGBT+ communities from feeling voluntary.

4.2.1 (Chosen) Family

"Ehm so I'd been socially transitioning since I was sixteen with friends but when I went to uni I came out to family so, socially transitioning in every aspect."

-Julian (21, student, North West)[11]

[11] On the first introduction of a participant, I will provide some demographic information. After this, I will only provide additional information if I want to clarify that a statement was made in the context of a focus group. If no additional information is given, it means that the statement was made in a one-to-one interview.

The above quote was how Julian began his answer when I asked why he had started getting involved with his university's LGBT+ community. The full answer covered his journey through legal name-changes and starting hormone therapy, and how these formal signifiers changed his ability to participate in university without the fear of being misgendered[12] or deadnamed[13]. What piqued my interest about this excerpt during the coding of the transcript, is that despite going on to describe legal and medical milestones in his transition, Julian's initial narration of what it means to transition 'in every aspect' is framed as a change to how he relates to his *family*.

This example is characteristic of the important role that relationships to biolegal family have in my participants' narration of LGBT+ volunteering life, and particularly the importance of the friction that can occur between LGBT+ people and their biolegal families: while participants noted varied and complex relationships to their own individual biolegal families, ranging from explicitly supportive, to conditionally supportive, to actively hostile, the conceptual notion of 'the biolegal family' was generally talked about negatively, as a potential or actual source of tension for LGBT+ people. In fact, there was such a ubiquitous doubt that family members provide love, care and support in a consistent and sustained way, that this doubt was not even considered a surprising or controversial thing to express. For instance, Orla (24, student, multi-campus /online) was the only participant who mentioned explicitly that their family was supportive. However, she also positioned this as a consequence of luck, rather than as something that is to be expected:

[12] Being called by a gender marker that is not congruent with one's identity, e.g. being addressed as a woman when one identifies as a man.
[13] Being called by the name one was given at birth, rather than one's chosen name.

"I've been very lucky. My friends have been very accepting, my family have been very accepting, and so learning from other people's experiences who might have not been as lucky, I think has definitely been very eye opening for me."

-Orla, focus group 3

Indeed, it makes both historical and statistical sense that Orla would describe their family situation as one of 'luck'. The family has traditionally been figured as a site for the instruction and reproduction of normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Schroeder, 2015), a space where one is disciplined out of the more 'rebellious' expressions of desire (Halberstam, 2011, p.27). Although legislative and social change can happen quickly, it seems that even to younger generations it is far from a given that LGBT+ people experience their families as a source of support: educational charity *Just Like Us* found that LGBT+ pupils in the UK are less likely to describe their relationship to their family as 'very close' (27% versus 50% of non-LGBT+ pupils), are less likely to think of their family as understanding the things that are important to them (9% versus 25% of non-LGBT+ pupils), and are more likely to disclose their LGBT+ identity to a friend (83%) than to a family member (49%) (Milsom, 2021).

This dichotomy between the LGBT+ person and the family was reiterated in the narratives of my participants: geographical proximity to biolegal family was often considered an explicit hurdle to participation in LGBT+ communities. Orla noted later on in the same focus group session that they had to organise in ways that strategically circumvented interaction with (or observation by) other members' families:

"People felt uncomfortable or perhaps uneasy joining in Zoom meetings, in case they had roommates or friends or family that they didn't want knowing that they were coming to an LGBTQ+ kind of community

> group. So we had to take a step back and like learn and try and figure out what we can do moving forward, how can we cater to these people, because people clearly wanted to join."
>
> -Orla, focus group 3

This potential for observation and identity disclosure was also negotiated as a *process*, rather than the one-time event that the phrase 'coming out' might imply. Deirdre (26, North East, student), for instance, lived with her mother during her undergraduate degree. Deirdre had already disclosed her bisexual identity to her mother, which was described as a very frictionless disclosure ("my mum is also gay so she had obviously no problem with it at all"). However, she still felt unable to take part in LGBT+ community activities because she lived next door to her grandmother, whom she described as "quite homophobic".

When asked how she then became involved in LGBT+ communities, Deirdre went on to describe how moving far away from her hometown to do her PhD "allowed" her to "explore the opportunities that [she] wasn't able to do back home". Having physical, geographical distance away from the family space was a prerequisite for her to participate in previously-inaccessible communities, giving LGBT+ specific socials, bars and clubs as examples. Deirdre described this opportunity to engage with her university LGBT+ community both as something new to explore, as well as something she had been aware of but was unable to take part in. This exploratory aspect of university as an escape from the family and an opportunity to create new connections, is in line with the accounts of many of my other participants, as well as existing conceptualisations of the university as a site where one can encounter communities that conceptualise gender and sexuality in non-traditional ways, which may subsequently lead to a new conceptualisation of the self (Yost and Gilmore, 2011; Kulick *et al.*, 2017).

It was not just physical distance that mattered in relation to family ties, but also the imagined *conceptual* proximity to the family. In one of the focus group sessions, Evie (27, staff, North East) argued that even the *potential* of information being relayed to families was a barrier towards coming out, or engaging with the LGBT+ staff network. The (in)ability to choose when and to whom the narratives of identity disclosure and communal affiliation occur, and control over its potential consequences seem to be key in Evie's narration of why one might hesitate to join an LGBT+ community, given how other people may respond to it: "Am I okay with just telling one person or two people, is it gonna get back to my family, is it going to then impact me in my job?".

Evie and some of my other participants' conceptualisation of their relation to the family, provides a reversal of what has typically been taken-for-granted within UK political discourse. Instead of seeing LGBT+ identity as a problem to the family unit, it is the constraints of the normative family which pose a problem for the ability to create or find an LGBT+ community. It is therefore unsurprising that participants readily positioned the family *prima facie* as something that could/should be changed, added to, chosen, or created. This provided a flexibility around the application of the word 'family' that has been observed in LGBT+ communities more broadly (Weston, 1997; Hull and Ortyl, 2019). Indeed, the word 'family' was used by several different participants, independently of each other, to describe their university LGBT+ communities. Graham discussed how his LGBT+ community gave him "a feeling of belonging that [he doesn't] have for other places [...] to create your family, create your world", while Orla saw her society's role as providing "a form of support and a kind of second family for those that don't feel like they've got much of a community around them". Frankie (39, staff, South West) noted that LGBT+ staff networks gave her "an opportunity to represent your identity but also have that idea of a kind of chosen family and friends. [...] people are there for each other within that community".

Further in her discussion of her ‘chosen family’, Frankie specifically drew on her own negative experiences of her biolegal families and contrasted this with her LGBT+ community as a more supportive structure. This juxtaposition creates an equivalence between chosen and biolegal family by implying that they are similar enough to be worth comparing, while at the same time creating a distinction between the two by emphasising the difference in how they are experienced:

> “So my family aren’t supportive, but my kind of chosen family is pretty much all part of the LGBT community, or very obvious allies actually.”
>
> -Frankie

This explicit noting of choice, creation, and support as that which sets the LGBT+ ‘family’ apart from the biolegal family, places these participants in a long lineage of discussion of queer uses of the term, which Schroeder describes as “expand[ing] the functions of the family, destabilising its biological imposition and its concomitant constraints" (Schroeder, 2015). Furthermore, if we look at the family as a site of instruction, we can think of chosen families as not just ontologically but also epistemologically interesting: not simply places where people relate to each other differently, but also places where people *learn* to relate to each other differently. The ability to choose this engagement is, as mentioned in chapter 2, integral to establishing consent to this epistemological process (Batsleer, 2008, p. 92).

However, whether it was appropriate for the LGBT+ communities to be labelled ‘families’ was dependent on who was doing the labelling. A more critical note about the use of the word ‘family’ was raised by Johanna (58, staff, South East), who responded to the university’s decision to host a religious convention that explicitly disinvited same-sex couples:

"You know you talk about equality and inclusion, you talk about giving people a sense of belonging, you talk about the [university] family. But then when there's loads of money changing hands suddenly that family doesn't doesn't matter."

-Johanna

Here it is worth thinking about how family and institution work in similarly reproductive, instructive and (re)iterative terms or, alternatively, how family becomes an institution by reproducing similarity: an institution carves out its existence *as* an institution by (re)producing an image of itself, creating a performative appeal to familiarity, positioning itself as 'like' itself, a copy for which there is no original (Butler, 1990; Ahmed, 2012 p.38). Therefore, when the language of family is used by an institution like a university, it might be to emphasise this reproduction of familiarity - yet Johanna here points towards a conflicting use of whom the university claims to be familiar with, its staff/student population, or its business interests.

It seems here that Johanna's university has exactly (although incredibly cynically) picked up on the powerful potential of considering LGBT+ communities within the language of familiarity: the very value of LGBT+ communities as families, comes from their potential to create a group of people who might become familiar to one another, without reproducing the normative expectations and surveillance of the biolegal *family* as such. As will be discussed in the next section, familiarity and strangeness in LGBT+ interactions similarly had a large influence on how the notion of 'home' was experienced.

4.2.2 Expanding the home

If the family describes the space where one is conceptually instructed how to relate to the world and to oneself, the home may be described as the space where this instruction takes place. It is

no surprise then, that participants had similarly complex views on ‘home’ as they did on ‘family’. In terms of home space, participants were concerned with both the physical home, a roof over one’s head, as well as it being a space where people feel *at* home. Successful university LGBT+ communities were also frequently constructed in opposition to the various notions of ‘home’, be that the family home, the term time living space, or another permanent living space. Family homes in particular were described as potentially unsafe and unsupportive spaces, where LGBT+ people might be isolated from their community, or unable to fully be themselves. These complex ways of experiencing and conceptualising home, are in line with LGBT+ scholarship on home as the place where affective and spatial dimensions intertwine (Vaccaro, Russell and Koob, 2015, p. 37), and home as the place that marks the distinction between the private subject ‘inside’ and the public space ‘outside’ - a marking which can be both a reaffirming and a painful process (Ahmed, 2000, p. 52; Johnson, 2005).

Moira (24, staff, London) and Graham (50, staff, North East) amplified the latter point specifically by noting the disproportionally high prevalence of homelessness among young LGBT+ people. They were both particularly aware of this, because of their roles as staff members working in student support. The university LGBT+ communities on the other hand were talked about as spaces that could provide respite or freedom from ‘home’, as well as support in finding accommodation for students who had been kicked out of their family homes. Graham, for instance, spoke about the need for diverse housing which may facilitate on one hand encounters with “people a bit like you [...] away from your small town and the people you happen to meet at school and in your family”. On the other hand, it may facilitate people “[being] as they wish to be, and explore, and maybe find new things to be”. In this description, a successful LGBT+ home space is one that invites choice, rather than circumstance. At the same time, this choice is not fully individuated, as it depends on how the self relates to the people around oneself: the successful home space is away from what/who one might have known as

‘familiar’ and requires introduction to something *un*familiar, or requires one to become unfamiliar to oneself, ‘finding new things to be’. At the same time, it may be populated with people who one shares likeness with *outside* of the structure of the biolegal family. This push and pull between familiarity and strangeness, puts LGBT+ communities in an in-between space that is neither fully one nor the other.

Term time accommodation was generally talked about in more positive terms than family homes. However, participants also noted the relative lack of choice in the matter of cohabitants, and how this serendipity could have various effects. Marcela (19, student, London) mentioned that some of the people she befriended in university halls were queer, and that she was excited about that because she’d never had queer friends before. Orla, on the other hand, mentioned that while her straight housemates were supportive, this was not the same as being in an environment where LGBT+ experiences are shared, and that this was therefore something she searched for outside of the home.

Archie, who went to a university with a collegiate structure, similarly spoke about their disappointment at not having been accepted into their first choice of college, the reputation of which they described as “very left wing liberal and also like a hotbed of queers”, which would have been a stark contrast to the experience they had of their family home:

> “While I might have been quite lucky in having a strong sense of myself, I did not get a positive reaction at home? And it was ignored essentially until I went to uni and like re-came out and was like honestly, I have a girlfriend, we need to just move on now [laugh].”
>
> -Archie

Although Archie did not end up living in their first choice of college, the college they did live in allowed similar interaction with campus-based LGBT+ communities. Furthermore, their desire to attend a college specifically *in order to interact with other LGBT+ people*, still shows the extent to which the term-time homespace speaks to the LGBT+ imagination: the term-time home is different to the familial home, and the lack of prior knowledge around who one will live with, opens up the possibility of living with someone who is very different than one's family. The lack of control over one's term time accommodation is therefore both an opportunity for contingent LGBT+ connection, as well as potentially being inadequate in meeting the social needs of LGBT+ students.

This interplay between choice, control, and contingency gained an additional layer through the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many communities were forced to move their activities fully online and participants dialled in from their homes. While the complexities of constructing community virtually will be touched upon in further chapters, there were specific mentions of home space in the context of the pandemic, that warrant its discussion here. For instance, as noted earlier in the chapter, Orla discussed that for some people in her community, the collapse of 'home' and 'LGBT+ community' into one virtual space was actually a dangerous situation, because of the likelihood that unaccepting family or other cohabitants might see that one is engaging with an LGBT+ community. She specifically mentioned a case of one of her committee members needing to drop out of organising with the society, exactly because he lived at home and was afraid his parents would find out. This emphasises the need for LGBT+ community spaces as needing the potential to be not just emotionally and ideologically, but also physically and geographically distinct from the family/home space, allowing people control over the extent and manner in which they interact with the family/home.

On the other hand, the ability to join LGBT+ communities from home was discussed in terms of overcoming an access barrier. Both Julian and Scout (20, student, North West) mentioned continuing to reach out to people who were still at home even after campus restrictions had been lifted, to accommodate those who were unable to join in-person. Julian initially ran into a lot of difficulties connecting people to external organisations when lockdown restrictions meant that simply walking in was no longer possible. However, he argued that “it still needs to be done, you still got to do these things,” and adapted his volunteering to move completely online. This continued even after the restrictions ended and campus was reopened, and at the time of the interview he was still running online meetings with people if they preferred staying at home. Scout also noted that online presence was important for people “because maybe they’re immunocompromised, or they just don’t feel comfortable coming in-person yet, stuff like that or even just ‘cause they’re not in [university city].”

Scout and Julian here provide a view of LGBT+ communities that are not in opposition or conflict with homespace. Rather, through the use of online technologies, they *expanded* the LGBT+ community to a non-physical space, and even offered an opportunity for the LGBT+ community to extend to the home, if people so wished. It is notable that Julian and Scout were the only participants who did their undergraduate degrees during pandemic campus closures (Marcela started when universities had already gone back to face-to-face teaching). Perhaps using distance learning technology as a necessary component to university life, meant that Julian and Scout had a more flexible idea of what university communities could/should look like, and how they should relate to the home space.

Incidentally, Julian’s description of people joining if they ‘prefer’ to stay at home was the only time where ‘home’ was positioned as a space that might be actively preferable to meeting in person, rather than a space that one is resigned to. Again the ability to *choose* one’s preference

here seems to be central to whether the home space is experienced as safe compared to the university space, and to what extent the familiarity of home space can/should be reproduced in the way that LGBT+ communities operate.

4.2.3 A Third Place?

As the previous two sections have hopefully illustrated, considerations of how/where LGBT+ communities position themselves in relation to familiarity and strangeness, is highly dependent on how these communities are experienced in both social and geographical terms, as well as the extent to which people feel like they have agency over the terms on which they engage with the community. It is here that I want to refer to Ray Oldenburg's conception of Third Place, as I think this term captures some (though not all) of the complex interplay between strangeness and familiarity, between choice and contingency, and between the individual and the community.

The Third Place is defined against the domestic and the professional sphere. They are the places we go to, once our professional or domestic responsibilities have been fulfilled for the time being. As such, they are spaces characterised by voluntary engagement: one *chooses* to be there but can never be obliged to show up. This also ties into the Third Place's relation to surveillance - as there is no formal hierarchy between participants in a Third Place, there is nobody who has the unquestionable monopoly on what is or is not the correct way of conducting themselves, nor does one need to justify one's absence or presence in the Third Place on any given day. Additionally, the Third Place is a place where "unrelated people relate" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 10). One becomes familiar with the others in the Third Place, but again this familiarity is never solidified to the point of formal obligation. The ability to choose to engage in community-based activities and interactions, necessarily includes the ability to choose *not* to engage (Batsleer, 2008, p. 7).

Indeed, the drive to create a place like this seemed to be a foundational reason for people to get involved in their communities: a place which bridges the gap between strange and familiar. A place which is spatially, temporally and and emotionally consistent: you know where and when 'familiar strangers' can be found. However, at the same time this creation of a familiarly strange *community*, does not require consistent or mandatory attendance from the *individual*. Some examples of what this looks like in individual universities were given by Evie, Crispin (30, staff, London) and Feliks (23, student, London). Evie talked about being a buddy for staff members wanting to join the group, and how important she found it that "they have that friendly face [...] and I welcome them into the group and be there for them if they do have any questions." Meanwhile Crispin mentioned that they created a Rainbow Room, which he described as "an LGBT friendly space that staff and students can use". He noted that part of the plans for the use of the Rainbow Room included members of staff being around the area on an informal basis, to check whether people want to have a casual conversation with someone. Feliks set up a series of regular hobby clubs through his LGBT+ student society, including a book club and a film club. He even explicitly mentioned that the purpose of these clubs was not really to indulge in practising the hobby itself. Rather the clubs were made with the assumption that they would give people a sense of belonging "because they struggle with a sense of belonging elsewhere in society or in the family units". It is notable that Evie, Crispin, and Feliks all stressed that these events were casual, informal, and non-compulsory. They constituted a gentle easing-into community, while at the same time *creating* the community that people were being eased into.

It is clear then, that some parallels can be drawn between LGBT+ communities and Third Places, in terms of their non-compulsory nature and their ability to facilitate connections between relative strangers. However, the use of Third Place as a lens through which to see LGBT+ communities does require some nuance. In particular, it requires seeing the university as a site of both leisure *and* labour at the same time. Surprisingly, Oldenburg's analysis of Third

Places itself lacks a discussion of the relations between those present in the Third Place for leisure purposes, and those who are present as workers facilitating these places: the majority of his examples of Third Places, are places where some monetary exchange happens between those who run the space infrastructurally and those who participate in the space socially. For instance, the payment between bar staff and patrons. Indeed, it is this payment which separates those for whom the Third Place *is* a Third Place: for a waitress, the bar stops being a space of leisure and starts being the Second Place, a place of work.

As mentioned in chapter 3, there were many more staff participants who worked in professional services roles, compared to academic/teaching staff. Crispin noted that this divide was reflected within his staff network. He explained that in his experience, professional services staff were able to be more flexible in their work schedule, as they were not bound by teaching timetables, and therefore had more opportunity to take on tasks or attend meetings throughout their working day. Furthermore, for many professional services staff, the organisational work they did within their staff network overlapped with their professional roles, particularly where this pertained to student/staff attainment and wellbeing, university ranking reports, and diversity impact reporting. On one hand, this meant that many staff members could 'sneak in' tasks for the networks during their normal work hours. On the other hand, for some staff members it meant that the boundary between work and volunteering was unclear.

This dynamic was evident in how Suzie (33, staff, South West) narrated her experiences of her staff network. Suzie worked in the same city that her university was based in, but lived in a nearby city which was bigger and has a more lively LGBT+ scene. She used the terms 'gay family' to refer to the LGBT+ connections facilitated by leisure spaces like the clubs, bars, pubs and cafes she visits in the bigger city. However, she noted that these spaces are almost entirely absent from the university city. Suzie was the only participant to apply the term 'family' to refer to

an LGBT+ community *outside* of the university - a community facilitated exactly by the prototypical Third Places that Oldenburg describes, such as clubs, bars, pubs and cafes. Furthermore, Suzie emphasised the university's role as an *employer* as a reason for why they should provide structured LGBT+ support for staff. So while the staff LGBT+ community might be imagined separate from the biolegal family, to Suzie this does not seem to automatically make it a Third Space, because it remains attached to the language, structures, and responsibilities of employment.

This blurred line between employment and voluntary work was echoed by Carmelita (24, staff, London), who used to be part of her university's LGBT+ staff network prior to the interview. She has since left, but has found that her professional services job still overlaps a lot with the network activities:

> "I'm not part of the network anymore [...] but I'm the one who creates initiatives or events and support events for the network and for the wider community [...] We think, 'why should we have to do the work?' There should be hired facilitators. Currently we're doing the Stonewall accreditations I have to handle the application but it shouldn't be network members that are continuously working outside of their remits"
>
> -Carmelita

Here too the voluntary attachment of the network is compromised. Carmelita clearly is not in a position to *leave* the demands of the network, because these partially fall under her professional remit. Yet the fact that she primarily describes herself as a network member working on community events, suggests that it is her *community* attachment rather than her professional attachment, which is relied upon in her day-to-day work.

This sense of non-voluntary attachment does not just have to come from a formal job

description. It can also come from an internal sense that one is responsible for the running of a community, because otherwise it does not happen at all. For instance, after switching jobs and switching universities, Graham noted that it had been a long time since he had started working anywhere without immediately becoming involved in the local community. He described this as a repetitive, almost unconscious behaviour, noting that he was “a bit sensitive to certainly finding [him]self organising because no-one else is doing it”. As a result, the fact that he was not doing this work in his new job, was a pleasant and novel sensation to him. Here too, Third Place does not seem like a term that adequately covers the intricacies of responsibility - at least not without careful caveating. Of course, the fact that Graham has chosen not to involve himself in his current university’s LGBT+ community, shows that there *is* a level of individual choice to the engagement in LGBT+ community organising. However, the fact that Graham describes his tendency in almost *in*voluntary, automatic terms (he ‘finds himself’ organising), shows the level of obligation that can become attached to LGBT+ communities, and the extent to which it can be inappropriate to see these communities as entirely individually ‘chosen’ communities. This sense of obligation, even in ostensibly ‘voluntary’ work, will be further explored in chapter 5.

Altogether, participants showed a variety of expectations of how their university LGBT+ communities related to familiarity and strangeness. Some used (rhetorical or circumstantial) attachment to the family/home to conceptually and practically expand upon the things that an LGBT+ community could provide. For others, however, these lingering attachments proved problematic as they imposed on the agency of participants to relate to the LGBT+ communities on their own terms. The Third Place is a helpful concept to think about how LGBT+ voluntary communities relate to agency, familiarity, and strangeness, as the camaraderie found in a Third Place is an ideal that is very close to what many participants strive towards. However, this concept cannot fully cover all intricacies of how university students and staff relate to their LGBT+ community, as they may feel institutional as well as intra-communal obligations to

involve themselves in their communities. Indeed, while *individual* agency seems to be key to Oldenburg's conception of Third Places, this conception clearly needs to be expanded upon to be useful to LGBT+ volunteers. In the next section then, I will explore how LGBT+ voluntary spaces are also co-constructed in a communal, (re)iterative, performative way, which cannot easily be reduced to individual engagement.

4.3 Having 'something'

Where the previous section has emphasised the choice and agency of LGBT+ communities to engage in familiar/strange experiences as necessary and desirable, in this section I will elaborate on how this is not something that comes about as an individual, one-time act. Instead, interview participants presented their LGBT+ communities as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), where both the shared-ness as well as the sharing of similar experiences was valued as a key part of performatively creating this community. In particular, reference to participants' own past experiences of LGBT+ communities, were central to how they constructed their current communities. The continuous (re)iteration of community, as well as the opportunity to adapt *how* this community was imagined and enacted, was presented as fundamental to the construction of a sense of community altogether. This back-and-forth between creation, adaptation, and (re)iteration meant that participants navigated the distinctions between familiarity and strangeness in temporally complex and thoughtful ways.

4.3.1 Shared experiences, sharing experiences

For many participants, the motivation for getting involved with their university communities was borne out of a desire to socialise with other LGBT+ people. This desire to socialise itself stemmed from the assumption that to some extent, there is a shared experience of 'being' LGBT+. Many participants spoke about being LGBT+ as if it was something that establishes an

a priori commonality among people who engage in these spaces. This was often figured as experiences of societal and interpersonal disadvantage, and as experiences that were deemed potentially unsafe to discuss outside of LGBT+ spaces. For instance, Hui Ting (23, student, London) equated safety with likeness, in describing the aim of her student society as "very much about establishing a sense of community and of a place that feels safe, [...] bringing together people that have something in common". This is reminiscent of the creation of an 'imagined community', where even prior to meeting one another, members imagine themselves to have some sort of commonality (Anderson, 1983).

Indeed, the 'nation-building' that LGBT+ communities often perform has been well-noted within academia. There are a variety of indicators of 'shared-ness' within LGBT+ spaces, that have come to be used as interpellations of the in-group: for instance the bringing-together of LGBT+ people under the visual indicators of the rainbow flag (Klapeer and Laskar, 2018), references to a presumed shared global history (Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2014), a shared 'look' in terms of fashion and appearance (Formby, 2017, pp. 53–54), and within the space of university campuses, a shared geographical experience of the learning environment (Vaccaro and Newman, 2016). There is good reason for this appeal to similarity: in recent history LGBT+ communities have been naturalised as intrinsically or constitutionally alike through the assumption that they are made up of people who pathologically divert from norms of gender and sexuality (Purton, 2017, p. 10). In a world where LGBT+ experiences are often presumed to stand in 'natural' opposition to the norm, finding a community where there is an implicit sense of shared-ness is often valued by participants[14].

[14] Of course, as Anderson figures the imagined community as intrinsically boundaried, these interpellations that create the in-group, at the same time create an imaginary out-group. The potential criticisms, problematic exclusions and inadequacies of this nation-building and boundary-drawing will be discussed in chapter 5 and beyond.

In this section I will examine how participants narrated the imagination of their communities as constructed through shared experiences. In the traditional building of the nation state, the imagination of the nation is often naturalised as something pre-discursive and eternal, something that has always already existed (Anderson, 1983, p.11). My participants, on the other hand, seemed to employ an explicitly social constructionist perspective on in-group/out-group dynamics, even if the term 'social constructionist' was not used. This is evident, for instance, in the following quote by Feliks. Here, he was discussing why peer support can be particularly helpful for LGBT+ students, compared to university-provided pastoral support:

> "You generally have some shared disadvantage, like the way that society has treated you individually is shared between you? So it's kind of like a peer-peer, or like it's not just peer support but peer support from people with similar experiences to you."
>
> -Feliks, focus group 1

Although Feliks employs the idea that other LGBT+ people have experiences of disadvantage that are shared prior to meeting each other, he does not describe these as *natural* or inevitable experiences. Instead, he describes these experiences as created through shared societal treatment. I here want to draw a parallel with Sara Ahmed's figure of the 'stranger'. Ahmed uses this figure in *Strange Encounters* to explore familiarity and strangeness in the context of postcoloniality, and argues that the 'stranger' is not an imagination of one who is unknown, but rather one who is known to be a threat to the imagined community (Ahmed, 2000, p. 55). In *The Promise of Happiness* she elaborates on how this knowledge operates affectively in the stranger themselves as she argues that "to recognize yourself as the stranger is to become conscious of the violence directed toward you" (Ahmed, 2010, p.82).

However, Feliks seems to reverse this trajectory, turning it from a painful experience of individual exclusion into a collective experience of mutual support: by being conscious of the violence directed towards oneself, it is possible to recognise oneself as a stranger. By recognising the pattern of this violence in others, it is possible to recognise oneself as a *community* of strangers. Once again it seems like LGBT+ communities function very similarly to a Third Place, where the coming-together of strangers creates a sense of familiarity.

Yet it is not merely the convergence of strangers that creates a community in the moment that they show up to a space together: although there was clearly a notion of an in-group and an out-group, participants did not just think of 'sharing experiences' as a natural or intrinsic state of being that divided one from the other. They also noted that *in the process of sharing experiences*, community is fostered. For instance, Alexa (24, student, multi-campus/online) mentioned the following when asked about the first event she set up for her LGBT+ student community:

> "It's always nice to kinda have someone who understands maybe more of your experience [...] it was nice to attend them and be like 'everyone here probably understands similar to what my experience is?' So I think it was nice for people in that sense to have a bit of solidarity."
>
> -Alexa

Note that the sharing of experiences here is the *point* of the event, rather than an afterthought to the 'real' event (e.g. a film screening or a talk). It is therefore not just the case that participants imagine familiarity to consist of shared experiences *prior* to engaging with each other at the event. They also recognise that the process of sharing these experiences with each other *creates* an imagination of community in itself. This shows a similar logic to the dialogical nature of critical pedagogy and informal learning (Freire, 1996; Batsleer, 2008), where the 'point' of

(peer) education is not necessarily for the dialogue to *do* anything. Rather the dialogue *is* the doing. University-based LGBT+ communities here seem to have a performative function, in that by communicating shared past experiences, the shared experience of being in community with one another is created, rendering one both recognisable and recognised (Butler, 1997). This dynamic is perhaps most succinctly captured by a quote from the *Care Manifesto*: “So, while we clearly need communities in order to share, what is perhaps less obvious is that sharing, in turn, helps to create community” (The Care Collective *et al.*, 2020, p. 31). Community both precedes and follows the opportunity to share.

This performative function as key to community interaction, also became evident in Feliks and Alexa’s interviews. Independently of each other, they noted the importance of their community *as a community* through comparison with student societies that have a more obvious utilitarian/external purpose. For instance, Feliks juxtaposed the LGBT+ society with consulting societies or Model United Nations societies, describing the latter two as “literally roleplay” of real life. LGBT+ volunteering, on the other hand, he described as having beneficiaries *in* real life “because we are doing something for someone within a certain big community of a university”. Alexa similarly discussed how much extra effort she put into LGBT+ volunteering, despite running into a lot of hurdles, because it was a community that she did not just want for other people, but also for herself. She juxtaposed this with a hypothetical society that she did not have the same personal investment in: “if it was a society that was talking about like appreciation of bees, then I probably would have given up very quickly”.

There is somewhat of a temporal concern here though - if the performative function of community-through-sharing propels it into a (re)iteration of this community-through-sharing, how do community members start this process of sharing? Put more plainly: in order to find other LGBT+ people to share experiences with, there first needs to be ‘something’ for LGBT+ people

to facilitate this connection. This was recognised by my participants, especially through the recognition of a *lack* - for some participants, the reason for starting their university LGBT+ communities was that there was nothing explicitly aimed at LGBT+ people on their arrival to their universities. Frankie, for example, mentioned being disappointed to find a lack of LGBT+ organising at all institutions she had been employed by, noting how “it had just fallen by the wayside and nobody did anything”. She re-started the Pride network at her previous institution, and founded the one at her current institution. Alexa also attended a campus that did not have any structured LGBT+ presence, and was dismayed that “even if [she] wanted to be involved, it didn’t exist”. Her subsequent solution was to simply start her own student network.

Neither Alexa nor Frankie talked about explicit problems that they would have gone to an LGBT+ network with. Yet the mere fact that there was no structure through which to connect to other LGBT+ people was a problem in itself. This positions the LGBT+ community space as one that is not primarily or solely utilitarian - there are no problems that the university LGBT+ community is tasked with solving. Instead, the creation of a community in and of itself was seen as purposeful, as it facilitates the *potential* for this sharing to happen. Although (as will be discussed in chapter 6 and 7) participants did not always think of this potential as coming to its full fruition, they largely saw their individual role within the community as establishing this potential in the first place.

The importance of (potential) connection as not just a means to an end, but a goal in itself, is exemplified by the motivations that Veronique (23, student, London) and Hui Ting gave for starting their networks. These two participants set up LGBT+ networks within their specific schools and disciplines (Maths and Business, respectively), in order to combat the invisibilisation of LGBT+ people within these subjects. In the quotes below they both characterise arts, humanities, and social science students as more at ease with topics of gender

and sexuality. At the same time, this ease also seems to create a possible source of intimidation for students of other subjects:

> "People in STEM often feel like they don't quite belong there, or everyone's like too cool and like [laugh] artsy for them and it's not necessarily their place? So I think, having like a STEM-specific one has been really nice for a lot of people that don't always feel so comfortable in those."
>
> -Veronique

> "Like the LGBT society is quite big but it was full of people that weren't from my course. They weren't from Econ, they were more from, I guess Social Science courses? Where people are a bit more open and stuff? [...] I reached a point where I kind of accept that the environments that I often end up with, considering my academic background, have very little diversity in general, like in every aspect of it there is no diversity."
>
> -Hui Ting

Taking part in LGBT+ related events and communities was also described as something that more easily comes up in the social sciences, arts, and humanities, because of the subjects that courses in these disciplines deal with. Other disciplines, however, were seen to require an explicit subject-specific invitation to participate. This was addressed by Veronique, who noted that within STEM "it's very easy to hide, it never really comes up in conversation". Veronique mentioned as well that one of the events she ran did not just introduce her to new LGBT+ people, but also allowed her to reassess her prior perception that she was the only LGBT+ person in her department: no longer *just* a stranger, but a community of strangers. She described working with a lecturer for a whole summer, unaware that they were gay, only to find out through their mutual attendance at one of the LGBT+ events.

Altogether, a social constructionist view of LGBT+ connection as both always-already community *and* a community that emerges in the process of being together, allows for a kinship to emerge that is not tied to the biolegal family or the home, but rather is based on both the *shared-ness* and the *sharing* of experiences. This ouroboros of sharing, allowed for a performative creation of LGBT+ spaces: spaces that do not just *precede* communal sharing, but also effect it. Having 'something' for LGBT+ people to connect through, particularly in environments where this 'something' might not easily emerge, was reason enough for many participants to become involved with their communities, outside of any further utilitarian use that these spaces hold.[15]

4.3.2 What they would have wanted

> "When I started second year I had a legal name change and I was a month away from starting hormones in second year, so I didn't want anyone to have the experience that I'd had in first year, you know like being trans was a barrier to education. Because that's how I felt."
>
> -Julian

In narrating their motivations for becoming involved with LGBT+ communities, many participants referred back to their own negative experiences of university. Some of the volunteers noted that their reason for getting involved with (or setting up) their LGBT+ community, was because they would have liked one of these communities to exist when they were younger, but there was none, like Hui Ting and Veronique in the previous section. Similarly, some volunteers who did have prior LGBT+ communities available, felt that these communities were not accessible or welcoming towards them, and therefore made efforts to change the aspects that had bothered them in the past. If the previous section was a way of showing how LGBT+ communities place themselves in consciously non-naturalised genealogy of community, in this section I want to

[15] In chapter 5 I will expand upon the particular joys of 'purposelessness' as well as the loss of this purposelessness during the pandemic.

explore how participants do not just mimic the reproduction of similarity that happens within families and institutions, but also creatively change and adapt elements that they do not find satisfactory.

In fact, several volunteers positioned themselves as being *more* able or *more* motivated to provide a good community experience for others, because of their own negative past experiences. Volunteering communities therefore seem to be approached in a way that imagines healing of or improvement upon past experiences, like Orla and Julian in the following two examples:

> "I didn't feel very included in my experience in my undergraduate, and I felt like I was quite shy and I was new coming out. So I feel like 'cause I've got that experience, I can try and make it even more welcoming and inclusive. [...] It's made it really enjoyable actually."
>
> -Orla

> "The experience I've had is going through something that you haven't liked, or has made you feel uncomfortable, or you've seen something that you're not happy with, and really wanting to change that. And I think that is why a lot of people do get into volunteering. Sort of 'make the changes that they didn't have' sort of thing."
>
> -Julian

This consistent return to past experiences of the self is reminiscent of stereotypical pathologisation of LGBT+ people as being 'stuck' in their development, unable or unwilling to (re)produce a forward lineage (Ahmed, 2006, p.77). This desire to *stay* with the past instead of *moving*-past could therefore be read as an expression of 'queer time': the time that is non-accumulative, non-teleological, non-productive or perhaps differently-productive, that which is in opposition to straight/forwardly reproductive time (Halberstam, 2005). This linking of time,

movement, and collectivity can be explored through Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'desire path' (Ahmed, 2006). This is an unpaved path which comes into being, not through official sanctioning or planning, but through collective use - it is often a shortcut between 'proper' paths, or a path that provides access to a space where people are not supposed to go. Ahmed argues that by deviating from the normative path, queer desires can pave alternative paths.

Similarly, my participants identified something they found lacking in their original 'path'. Instead of replicating this path out of habit or convention, they forged a new one, explicitly with the intention to create a path that could be followed by people after them. In bringing their individual histories to the organisation of the LGBT+ community, volunteers do not only challenge the individualist dichotomy that separates the agentic self from a discrete 'other'. They also challenge the temporal plane on which this challenging takes place: agency is not only asserted intersubjectively in the communal space here and now, but also reverberates through time by connecting past, present, and future.

The effort it takes to forge a new path was also acknowledged in volunteers' narratives around the responsibilities that they felt towards younger students or newer staff members. In the interviews and focus group sessions, the concept of community members' 'first contact' was given so much space and weight in the discussion, that it required its own thematic code. While volunteers generally acknowledged that identity disclosure can occur at any point in life, including before and after attending university, they also noted that for some people, university communities provided a first contact with LGBT+ communities, or even with LGBT+ individuals altogether. This positioning meant that university spaces could (as Feliks puts it in the quote below) 'make or break' someone's views of LGBT+ communities:

“I also try to remind my co-volunteers that a lot of the time things that we do will be most likely their first time to engage with the LGBT+ community at university, and maybe in their lives? And if they have a negative experience of being marginalised then they will be pushed out for years. Maybe they’ll try re-engaging in the future, but we really are there to make it or break it?“

-Feliks

Furthermore, Feliks mentioned that they could imagine that someone who is new to the university’s community might feel anxious. It was therefore important that this anxiety was not validated through negative experiences:

“In my year group at my school there was an attempt to create an LGBT+ society or club, during our sixth form. But it was specifically run by two people who intimidated me? So I never participated in it.”

-Feliks

Edward (40, staff, London), too, separately brought up the possibility for negative first experiences to potentially scare people off engaging with LGBT+ communities altogether, and explained that this informs how he conducts the LGBT+ staff network. Like Feliks, he tied this explicitly to his own negative first interactions with campus LGBT+ communities:

“I had quite a harrowing experience in terms of my engagement with formal communities? Because when I was at my first university I was told I was too straight to be part of the LGBT network or that I came across as too straight, and that it was probably something temporary. Which was really shocking, both then and now and quite a distressing experience in a way.”

-Edward

Indeed, as much as one's initial contact was described in terms of being daunting or anxiety-inducing, it was also described in positive terms: Scout, for instance, noted that meeting other LGBT+ people for the first time could take away worries about self-surveillance:

> "I think especially for the first years 'cause it could be the first time they're able to meet other LGBT people that they can relate to and understand, and not have to worry about what they're saying."
>
> -Scout

Engagement in these spaces is therefore not solely seen as beneficial to the individual participant at the point of engagement, but also can inform how one builds upon past experiences. Again, the ability of participants to be in control of *creating* a space according to needs that were previously unmet, constructs the LGBT+ community of choice as preferable to interaction with an LGBT+ community that one has no control over, or not interacting with any LGBT+ communities at all. Yet, this choice is not an individual one, but rather is navigated collectively.

This section has shown that participants narrate their engagement with and facilitation of LGBT+ communities in spatially and temporally complex ways. While the imagination of community is shown to be partially dependent on a perception of bringing prior experiences *to* a space, this same community is created *in the process* of sharing these experiences, and can be adapted to provide a different way of envisioning *future* community. While this might seem vague or necessarily contradictory, the 'something' that emerges into view out of these temporal relationships, was clearly highly valued by participants.

4.4 Conclusion - carving with strangers

I started this chapter by relaying my own relation to familiarity and strangeness, and my confusion with the way I seemed to contradictorily want *and* reject both at the same time. Of course, having explored my participants' narratives of family and home space, it is the element of *voluntary, chosen attachment* that goes some way to explaining this seeming paradox. The ability to re-create my sense of self with people who had no prior idea of who I was allowed me to create a sense of familiarity away from my biolegal family and away from the home in which I grew up. Instead, this sense of self was carved out alongside people that I had *chosen* to interact with. The campus LGBT+ community functioned as a Third Place for me when I first interacted with it[16]. It was the first place where I felt like I could engage with other LGBT+ people without the pressure of someone looking over my shoulder and evaluating whether I was doing it 'right', yet at the same time I was able to build enough familiarity with others to ask for guidance if I ever needed it: while the carving was arduous and time-consuming, it was done in the company of others who carved with me.

Altogether, the purpose of this chapter was to show why LGBT+ volunteers start their journey of creating their chosen community of strangers within Higher Education, as well as what is deemed missing, unsatisfactory, or not-yet-there to warrant the creation of these communities. While family and the home space were not by definition experienced negatively, the inconsistency with which people could rely on these spaces to provide support, care, and a sense of belonging (particularly during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic), caused a need for chosen and actively-created communities.

[16] In further chapters I will explore how it became evident to me that this initial experience of my campus LGBT+ community required a more nuanced analysis.

What role these chosen communities filled was more difficult to determine. Indeed, if the creation of ‘chosen’ communities seems like it falls into entrepreneurial discourses of the individual, it is exactly the ability of this chosen community to hold all these communal contradictions, that challenges this individuality. While some participants described their communities in kinship terms, the use of the word ‘family’ was problematised by other participants. Similarly, while there was on one hand a presumption that LGBT+ people had an imagined *a priori* (although not naturalised!) connection through shared experiences, this became problematic at the point where people had to choose whether or not to make these shared experiences known and participants had to find alternative ways of including people who were less able or less willing to externally share these experiences.

However, it was not just the sharing of experiences that was deemed important, but also the fact that this sharing performatively and affectively constituted (and was constituted by) a ‘something’ that allows people to do this sharing. Having ‘something’ that facilitates the sharing of that which is familiar along with introducing that which is strange, communicates an intent of communality regardless of what is being done or said *within* this ‘something’. Similarly, not having ‘something’, or having a ‘something’ that was deemed inadequate, was an incentive for participants to create their own ‘desire paths’, forging ways for newer/younger people to be in community with each other. In the next chapter, I will delve into how this interplay between community and participation both created and delimited the opportunities for certain groups of people to take part in the ‘something’ of LGBT+ community.

Chapter 5 - Participation, belonging and the limits of community

5.1 Introduction

"It did become a space for the louder voices to, I don't know, to like mingle, date and plan nights out."

-Feliks

Where were you when *Heartstopper* (Lyn, 2022) was released? Even before the Netflix series dropped, my volunteering group chats were buzzing with anticipation. This was not just going to be a piece of entertainment, it was going to be a *community event*. *Heartstopper* would be 'the' positive representation that 'we' as a community needed so badly. Indeed, following the release of the series, I would estimate that about 90% of the conversations I had with fellow LGBT+ volunteers in Summer 2022 involved the phrase 'Have you seen *Heartstopper* yet?'.

I am being facetious here of course - yet the seeming ubiquity of *Heartstopper* was fascinating in how it was taken up within discourses of community. As someone who has still not seen it, my not-watching it has regularly been interpreted as an explicit communicative act that needs to be explained. The baseline assumption is that we either have all watched it, or that we have simply not yet had the time to watch it, but *really* want to. As a series that is led by and marketed through two cisgender, white, young, Anglophone men, I cannot help but feel that there is only a certain type of representation that can become emblematic of the entirety of LGBT+ life, where other stories may be seen as partial: even within LGBT+ life, there are expectations of who inhabits the 'somatic norm' (Puwar, 2004) and who does not.

In my volunteering both within and outside of universities, much value is given to the notion of being outwardly intelligible as someone who identifies as LGBT+. Often, this is seen as constitutive of and sometimes even interchangeable with participation in community, and the *Heartstopper* phenomenon is but one example of it - it is not uncommon for individuals to come out as 'a member of the LGBT+ community', as if individual identification and collective community engagement are necessarily one and the same. Conversations within volunteering spaces therefore often revolve around popular media characters or celebrities who are LGBT+, as well as potential role models within particular disciplines or careers. Seeing an openly LGBT+ person with highly-visible cultural platforms, is here not just interpreted as a person's individual expression of identity, but is additionally a communicative act towards other LGBT+ people ('you are not alone here'), and non-LGBT+ people ('you are not the only ones here'). It is no surprise then, that many of my participants brought up that they felt a responsibility to represent 'the' university's LGBT+ community.

This representative relation between the individual and the communal, informs many aspects of LGBT+ community construction, both in the imagination of what LGBT+ communities look like, and who 'actually' participates in them. For instance, in my work with an LGBT+ educational charity we are often told that by talking about our identification as LGBT+ we might be giving young people the language to identify themselves as LGBT+. Similarly, in this charity we are often implored to write and talk about how celebrities, fictional characters or industry role models 'allowed' us to see ourselves in particular jobs, inhabiting specific identities. There is a logic to this: imagining particular futures is a way of questioning whether the present status quo really is the only way of living (Muñoz, 2009a, p. 29). However, any imagination of what 'the' LGBT+ community is or what it could be, also necessarily presupposes an image (however vague) of who can constitute this community, and who cannot. Although this chapter (and indeed this thesis) is not particularly concerned with the role of popular culture, what it *is*

concerned with is the question of how representation and cultural intelligibility become taken up as cornerstones of LGBT+ community construction. Particularly, I will explore how power circulates in/through this intelligibility, delineating who feels able to participate in LGBT+ volunteering and how people experience this participation.

Where the previous chapter was concerned with the ways (prospective) students and staff become involved in university-based LGBT+ volunteering, this chapter is concerned with how communities are constituted, and how this ‘constitution’ is both delimited by and itself delimits the imagination of what LGBT+ communities typically look like: if a particular community is only ever imagined as being populated with particular bodies, it can be more and more difficult to imagine that other bodies may be welcome in this community, to the point where this representation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As with any performative communicative act, part of what creates the circumstances for this act to be successful, is through the embodiment of this communication in the ‘right’ person, authorised by an audience that interprets the communicative act in the ‘right’ way (Austin, 1962). For instance a baptism by a pastor might be understood as ‘successful’, whereas a devout Hindu could perform the same actions, recite the same scripture, and not have the baptism be seen as legitimate. Individuals are therefore not just individuals, they are representative embodiments of institutions and/or communities. Accordingly, they wield power to speak and act on behalf of these institutions and/or communities. Similarly, a judge might have the authority to sentence someone to life in prison, but if this sentence is expressed in the privacy of the judge’s house with nobody there to hear it, the judgement does nothing to affect the world.

For LGBT+ people, this link between representational power and individual positioning becomes particularly complicated. LGBT+ people's disclosure of identity is already dependent on a performative communicative act that brings the internal identity out into public intelligibility, more so than any formal process of becoming-LGBT+: we have to come out of the closet. Indeed, in the seminal *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes exactly that it is the extent to which one's sexuality is *openly available* knowledge that often informs how one is gendered and sexualised (Sedgwick, 1990).

This need to self-declare makes the experience of performative community construction unlike the performative communication involved with a profession or a religious standing - the extent to which one is treated as a judge or a priest, depends less on self-declaration of these identities, and more on the adherence to formalised rituals and training, as well as visibly recognisable forms of dress. The navigation and boundaries of outness are of course complex and multi-layered, and coming out is not a one-time act. In fact, scholars have warned exactly against a simplistic view of coming out as a form of confession, an act which brings some stable inner 'truth' out into the world (Butler, 1997, p.125; Weston, 1997, p.66).

Yet it is undeniable that there are ways of positioning oneself socially as 'in community with' other LGBT+ people, even if these 'ways' are not universal or totalising. For example, one study on coming out in the workplace, found that this process needed to be repeated over time (Ward and Winstanley, 2005). Another study examined lesbian identity disclosure within US collegiate sport teams, and discussed how people might come out specifically within the context of their team, and how this process was eased by there being other lesbians on the team (Stoelting, 2011). In both these studies, disclosing identity or aligning oneself with other LGBT+ people is not a one-time act, nor does it mean that this alignment is public knowledge in *all* parts of one's life. However, this is not the same as not coming out at all - clearly the processes whereby

people assert an individual or collective identity in relation to LGBT+ communities, are complex and context-dependent.

It is the aim of this chapter to explore the nuances of this positioning: how is it navigated, for whom is it (made) available, and how does the individual relate to the community within this positioning? As will become evident, research participants imagined and navigated these questions in complex ways. Furthermore, participants often had different uses of the term ‘community’ when discussing intra-community concerns, versus the discussion of LGBT+ communities in relation to the wider world. I will firstly discuss how boundaries of community are drawn, who is seen to implicitly ‘belong’ in this community, who does not belong, and who occupies the borderlands of the in-group and the out-group. Subsequently, I will examine the meaning of (non-)participation in an LGBT+ community: firstly, I will discuss the difficulties that arise from equating participation in LGBT+ community activities with an individual LGBT+ identity. Then, I will explore how the imagination of what a ‘typical’ LGBT+ community looks like, stratifies who feels able to take part in these communities. I will conclude this section by discussing how participation in community is informed by notions of similarity and difference. The final section of this chapter is dedicated to exploring the effects of COVID-19 on the ability of community members to take part in their university communities.

5.2 Community, identity and action

In this section I will discuss how participants drew boundaries between in-group and out-group participants, before exploring how participants utilised the status of allyship as a necessarily troubling and hazy category. Furthermore, I will discuss the extent to which the indexing of allying oneself with LGBT+ community was interpreted as a commitment *to* these communities, and how participants delineated between performative and non-performative speech acts.

5.2.1 Who do we mean by ‘community’?

In order to think about how participation in LGBT+ communities is conceived of, it is first necessary to ask how exactly the demarcation between community and non-community is made: what does being a community member mean, and how does this inform who or what is being indicated as a (potential) community member? This is not to say that these distinctions are (de)finite and universally applicable. Rather, the very way in which distinctions are made contextually relevant, can tell us a lot about how particular epistemologies become naturalised as common sense, through the creation of seemingly-stable dichotomies (Sedgwick, 1990). Therefore, although the *sense* of community as performatively imagined and constituted in/through shared experiences has already been discussed in chapter 4, this section is concerned with how the *word* community was employed.

As a term, ‘community’ is often employed in a way that seems to have a taken-for-granted meaning, even if on closer inspection its referent differs depending on context. For instance, in her research on the topic, Eleanor Formby investigates and challenges the common use of the word ‘community’ to describe groupings of lesbian, gay, bi and trans people. She argues that the uncritical use of the term ‘LGBT+ community’ implies that one’s sense of individual identification is equivalent to one’s sense of belonging in a social, interactional, communal arrangement, whereas this was often not straightforwardly experienced in this way by her interview participants. Instead, they attached various levels of importance to individual/shared identity, and had varying levels of engagement with other LGBT+ people (Formby, 2017).

My participants too used ‘community’ to index a variety of different relations during the interviews and focus groups, depending on the context: sometimes participants spoke about ‘the’ LGBT+ community on their campuses as communities of identification, meaning everyone

who identifies as LGBT+ regardless of whether they are out or not, and regardless of whether they engage with any formalised LGBT+ networks. At other times, the word ‘community’ was taken to refer only to those who intentionally choose to engage with a university society or network. An example of the former use is evident in this quote by Evie, where she uses the word ‘community’ interchangeably with ‘LGBT+ people’:

> “How they sold the network to us, it was very much ‘this is a safe space for you to come and talk about any issues that you want with like-minded people’ [...] and not just members of the community it’s also the allies as well.”
>
> -Evie

Here, Evie juxtaposes the term ‘community’ with ‘allies’, implying that ‘community’ refers to a community of *identification* as LGBT+ (how exactly ally and non-ally are dichotomised will be further explored in section 5.2.2). She separates this from the ‘network’, which is a community of intentional *practice*. Although Evie evidently expects there to be some overlap between identification and practice (or expects the listener to expect this), they are not positioned as one and the same - one can be part of the network without identifying as LGBT+, and one can identify as LGBT+ without being part of the network. Archie similarly defined ‘community’ as akin to internal identification:

> “I like the idea of LGBTQI communities plural? In the sense of, we’re composed of different sub-groups of people that are united commonly, but do have distinct experiences underneath the umbrella? So I guess anyone that identifies with any identity term captured by that acronym? You’re part of the community and you’re also part of sub-communities of the community.”
>
> -Archie

Although Archie uses ‘community’ here in an identitarian way, ‘identity’ here is not straightforwardly individualistic, and does not have singular, totalising attributes that distinguish the in-group from the out-group. The word ‘community’ here is used to describe an overarching set of identities, which in themselves also form communities. In Archie’s configuration, community is therefore contingent upon both similarity *and* difference of experience: the identification with specific terms may bring one closer to others who have similar experiences, but the fact that these terms fall under the ‘umbrella’ of the acronym implies an identification which is dependent on a coalition of people with different experiences.

On the other hand, there were people who used ‘community’ as something that LGBT+ people are not inherently a part of by virtue of identification, but rather something that needs to be actively created through interaction. Feliks, for instance, said that he began doing “community-building activities" in order to “induce this positive sense of belonging in students”. Imbuing this sense of belonging was important to him, because LGBT+ people may not get this from their wider environment. Feliks here sees LGBT+ people as those who may or may not participate in community. Therefore, ‘community’ here is akin to an *intentional* community of practice. What is also noteworthy, is the way Feliks describes community as arising through *repeated* activities undertaken together. Like the Butlerian view of identity as something that only gains meaning through being (re)iterated (Butler, 1990), community too requires (re)production over time, as well as collaborative engagement. There is therefore a distinct temporal and social aspect to Feliks’ notion of community, rather than considering ‘community’ to describe an individualised identification, or an action that has a defined end.

It is important to note that there was no concrete division between people who used the term ‘community’ to describe individual identification, and those who used it to describe interactive identification. Indeed, many participants mixed different uses of the term between their interview

and the focus group, within a singular conversation, or even within the span of one answer to a question. This is particularly exemplified in the following quote from Hui Ting, who was asked how she would define ‘LGBT+ community’:

“And how I would define it, I guess it’s like any sort of space that advocates for the community? I guess?”

-Hui Ting

Although Hui Ting describes the community as constituted through specific acts (advocacy), the fact that they are advocating *for* the community implies that this community also precedes the act. Again, we can think here of how Butler imagines the performatively constituted gendered subject, which appears to precede the act of its own interpellation (Butler, 1990). Furthermore, we can think of how this view of community relates to queer notions of futurity and utopia: if community needs to be constantly (re)created in action to ‘be’ (i.e. be legible as something stable), this can be both seen as a compulsion towards futurity (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005), at the same time as the constant re-iteration offers options for changing and adapting what it is that is being carried into this future (Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2009a).

This plurality of uses requires particular attention within the context of the university as an institution, as this context can delineate which exact use of ‘community’ may come to fruition. It is therefore important to note whether showing a community implies individual declaration (i.e. ‘there is a community’) or functions to show the performative process of this community as always-becoming. It is important not least because it has an effect on the temporal plane on which this showing takes place: a declaration can be one-off, whereas showing a process necessarily needs to unfold over time. The (self-)promotional functions of declaration versus process were particularly salient to my participants when discussing the concept of allyship. In

the next section, I will therefore analyse how participants spoke of allyship, and how the (self-)designation of ally status fits within the imagination of LGBT+ community.

5.2.2 Allyship - enactment and erasure of boundaries

In locating the individual's relation to 'community', allyship was figured as both firming up and blurring the lines of who is inside and outside of 'community'. This was not just an implicit figuration: participants occasionally explicitly commented on this hazy location of allyship as both inside and outside the 'community proper'. For instance, Evie tied the presence of allies to a sense of community and a sense of safety for LGBT+ people. This was firstly because they provided support outside of a personal LGBT+ identification, and signalled a broader culture of support within the wider university. Secondly, allies muddled a potentially hard boundary between in-group and out-group. Some of Evie's colleagues were not willing to be 'out' as LGBT+ on campus, so making the event accessible to allies provided a cover for these colleagues - they could 'just' be allies instead.

Even so, the exact function(s) of allyship changed depending on who it was that allies were juxtaposed against: in the above example, allies were juxtaposed *with* LGBT+ people *against* people who were neither LGBT+ nor allies. However, there were also circumstances where allies were juxtaposed *against* LGBT+ people, in particular when discussing intra-community issues: Johanna, for instance, argued that it was necessary for allies not to be included in all aspects of community, specifically when talking about life experience was concerned, as this might feel 'awkward' for LGBT+ identifying members of the community. This is consistent with the discussion of LGBT+ communities as created around 'shared/sharing experiences', as discussed in chapter 4. The 'experiences' that LGBT+ people and allies bring to LGBT+ communities are therefore positioned as differing - one may take part in the *sharing* space, but that does not mean that one has a *shared* experience. Allies were therefore seen as differing in

the *a priori* identity that LGBT+ people were presumed to share, even if it was still possible for allies to proactively engage in LGBT+ community causes.

This also came to the forefront in the extent to which (successful) allyship was defined *by* this proactivity. Successful allyship was generally seen as requiring a more active role or responsibility compared to LGBT+ identifying members of communities: Evie noted that allies were there to support and learn from the LGBT+ community, and Scout said that it would be nice if more allies could come to the identity talks, to bring understanding of LGBT+ people out of the specific LGBT+ space.

This proactivity itself also required an element of demarcation, to distinguish oneself from non-LGBT+ people who were neutral or hostile to LGBT+ communities. As discussed in section 4.2.1, Frankie noted that her chosen family consisted of people who were “pretty much all part of the LGBT community, or very obvious allies actually.” The qualification of ‘very obvious’ for allyship, implies a more publicly declared or marked positioning, versus people who are ‘part of the LGBT community’ without any further need for clarification. Note here too that for Frankie, allyship is separated as conceptually distinct from being ‘part of the LGBT community’. Similarly, some staff members (Frankie, Suzie, and Johanna) had been involved with formalised ally schemes in their university, which all included a visual signifier in this allyship scheme. This could include wearing a rainbow lanyard, having a rainbow flag on one’s office door, or being included on an ally list on the university’s website. This again implies that in order to be useful or successful, allyship should contain an element of outward communication. This stands in opposition to a label which one may identify with in private, or in a small, closed group.

This division between how LGBT+ identity and ally identity are constructed, might at first seem like a reification of LGBT+ identity as natural, stable, and dichotomised against an equally stable

and natural non-LGBT+ identity. This would of course be problematic, given that this perceived stability and intrinsicness of LGBT+ identity, has historically led to medical pathologisation and criminalisation (Dyer, 2002; Purton, 2017). However, I think the participants' focus on proactive community involvement rather than passive identification as constitutive of allyship, can bring a decidedly less deterministic point of view to this divide, while also appreciating that the ally/LGBT+ distinction is clearly one that matters to the participants. Allyship here is not conceptualised as something that you are or are not, but something that can be actively taken up through involvement with LGBT+ communities.

For instance, Frankie and Johanna both noted that in their view, being part of their university's ally scheme came with a responsibility to actively contribute to LGBT+ wellbeing in the university. In the scheme that Frankie was a part of, for instance, prospective allies were required to go to a talk on what was expected of them as LGBT+ allies. This was because there were some colleagues who, according to Frankie, were signing up to the allyship scheme without making any changes to their professional practice. Frankie said that she wanted people to "remember the rainbow lanyard is not just something pretty but it is a symbol, it means something. You have a responsibility, basically". Johanna similarly noted that being an ally to her is not only a performative speech act. The mere naming of oneself as an ally was not sufficient in her eyes, and instead she argued that there is more to be done after that, noting that "it's not just sort of saying 'oh yeah I'm a straight ally' it's, you know, what do you do with that".

It seems therefore, that successful allyship occupies a position that requires both a communicative aspect (e.g. signalling one's allyship to LGBT+ people, to the university, to students), while also requiring a component that goes beyond the communicative. As Frankie and Johanna's quotes show, there is an explicit awareness of the problem of what Ahmed calls 'non-performativity' (Ahmed, 2019), even if the participants do not use this exact term for it.

They point exactly to the possibility for a speech act to be performed with the expectation that it is the ‘speech’ rather than the ‘act’ which provides the momentum for change. Allyship too, evidently has the potential to centre the *display* or *communication* of allyship, above any *acts* of allyship.

Indeed, university LGBT+ allyship that relies solely or primarily on outward communication of ‘good’ or ‘progressive’ values, has been criticised for not tackling the (often more complex or longitudinal) issues that occur *within* a university (Spencer and Patterson, 2017; Calvard, O’Toole and Hardwick, 2020). Within my participant group too, the act of declaring oneself an ally was not deemed appropriate if this proclamation is used as a description of a change that is not actually happening. This ambivalent attitude to allyship seemed to be highly dependent on whom allyship is signalled to and with what purpose - to LGBT+ people, or to people who are not LGBT+? To convince people that a baseline of LGBT+ acceptance is necessary, or to actively celebrate LGBT+ identities?

This context-dependent use of ‘allyship’ was particularly fascinating to note in Frankie’s use of the term, when describing her interactions during the equality and diversity workshops she ran at her university. She brought these workshops up in one of the focus group sessions:

> “It got to the point where it would just be like ‘ugh, she’s talking about gay stuff again we don’t need to listen’ or whatever. It almost felt like it was the only thing I talked about. Why is it always the people who are part of the community having to push, where are the allies?”
>
> -Frankie

In this focus group session, Frankie had noted three times already that she’d had an amazing ally in HR (whom she had also brought up previously in her one-on-one interview). Yet the

phrase ‘where are the allies’ seems to imply that there were no people helping her at all. This might be explained by looking at the context in which the terms were employed. When Frankie was talking about her ally in HR, she tended to single this ally out as the exception among a generally uninterested university. She also highlighted the workload this ally faces being the only person actively prioritising the integration of LGBT+ network duties with her everyday paid role.

On the other hand, in the quote above, Frankie talks about an experience where she felt like she was forced to position herself as someone who only ever talks about ‘gay stuff’, and how she was subsequently *being* positioned this way by others. Here we can use Sara Ahmed’s phrase “Rolling eyes = feminist pedagogy” (Ahmed, 2017) to think through Frankie’s experience of this interaction. Ahmed uses this phrase to explain how negative affect becomes attached to the person addressing an institutional issue, rather than to the institutional issue itself. This attachment happens over time and repetition, as feminist pedagogy requires sticking to an issue that others deem resolved. The exhaustion that an onlooker might feel in being asked to examine this issue again and again, can then be expressed somatically. This might be the rolling of eyes, or in Frankie’s case as a sigh (‘ugh’). Sticking not just to the issue, but also sticking to people’s affective responses *when faced with an issue*, can in itself be valuable in tracing how emotions become institutionalised, or alternatively become institutionally glazed over.

In this case, by addressing institutional homophobia, Frankie herself becomes the marker of insistence that is met with an expression of tedium (‘ugh’). At the same time, in Frankie’s view, it remains necessary to ‘push’ for this *despite* the expression of tedium. Allyship here would mean someone other than Frankie occupying this interactional role, someone else being the recipient of tedium. Alternatively, it might mean that the tedium would not be expressed in the first place, as it would be more obvious that it is not *just* Frankie who keeps ‘sticking’ to a problem that to

others seems resolved: a successful act of allyship might be the demonstration that this is not Frankie's individual problem, or even the problem of the university's LGBT+ community, but an institutional problem.

Altogether, the concept of 'allyship' was employed in a variety of ways. Firstly, it was constructed in opposition to both LGBT+ people and non-allies, depending on context. Furthermore, the declarative power of allyship was considered to only be appropriate to the extent that this declaration was followed up with clear *actions* of allyship - just naming oneself an ally was not enough. However, it is exactly the slipperiness of allyship as a concept in-between action and declaration, that also made it useful as a term to blur the boundaries between LGBT+ identification and non-identification. This could then be used strategically to protect LGBT+ people who were not able to be unambiguously affiliated with their university LGBT+ communities. It is clear that in this strategic use of allyship, participants were concerned with who was able to access and participate in LGBT+ communities, and who was not able to do so. It is these concerns about access and participation, which form the topic of the next section.

5.3 The problems of participation

As explored in chapter 4 and in the previous section, university-based LGBT+ communities are often constituted in relation to other spaces, such as the home, the family, or the wider university community. However, this did not mean that there was a straightforward separation between LGBT+ spaces and non-LGBT+ spaces: many participants moved in several spaces concurrently, and as a result participants repeatedly brought up having to navigate the tension between the meaning that LGBT+ communities are given by people *inside* these communities, versus how this meaning is constituted by people *outside* the community. As will be explored in this section, the fact that entry to and participation in LGBT+ communities was not safe or

comfortable for everyone, meant that LGBT+ communities became occupied by (and occasionally geared towards) a monolithic group. However, my participants also noted efforts and strategies to circumvent this self-perpetuating dynamic.

5.3.1 External versus internal concerns

As shown in the previous section, participation in LGBT+ communities within the university was overwhelmingly intertwined with communication *about* these communities, and about the individual who chooses to participate: where the act of publicly affiliating oneself with LGBT+ communities could signal support for these communities, this also worked in reverse. Public support for or affiliation with LGBT+ communities and LGBT+ imagery could be taken as individual identification with an LGBT+ label. This was not always something that community members felt comfortable doing, be it because people were not certain of their own LGBT+ identity, or because they were not certain that their wider environment (be that professional, familial, convivial, etc.) would accept this identity.

Mitigation of these concerns has been discussed in the context of what universities can provide for closeted students in terms of services like housing or mental health support (Burleson, 2010). However, there has been little investigation into how students and staff experience the process of accessing the LGBT+ space *as* outing, and what they provide for each other in terms of the more intangible aspects of community. The findings of one study conducted on a campus in Australia (Ferfolja *et al.*, 2020), shows why the performative function of community affiliation can create a complex affective relationship between the student and the LGBT+ community. On the campus where Ferfolja conducted their study, designated Queer spaces were seen as both potential sources of support, as well as potential sources of anxiety for students who might be outed by their presence in the room, and subsequently face harassment where they previously did not.

The question of access that specific demographics have *within* LGBT+ communities, was a concern for Orla and Hui Ting, whose volunteering took place over the course of the first UK COVID-19 lockdowns. This meant that community events were in large parts convened online, with participants sometimes in countries where association with LGBT+ causes is heavily criminalised or stigmatised. The possibility for this online communication to 'leak' into participants' offline lives, was a major concern, especially when it was not clear how far online communication was likely to travel.

Hui Ting for instance noted that there was an assumption that people could be out in the UK, but that the potential for digital 'outing' kept some people from participating in LGBT+ community events nonetheless, because they feared that overt online participation might jeopardise their safety. Hui Ting concluded that this means that many LGBT+ spaces are "only accessible once you are out" in the first place.

Hui Ting here describes a situation where *because* engagement with LGBT+ communities involves an implicit coming-out, this is off-limits to those who are unable or unwilling to be interpreted (correctly or incorrectly) as LGBT+. She also addresses the fact that communication has the potential to cross borders into other legislative and social contexts. This emphasises the extent to which participation in LGBT+ communities can (and often does) enact a disclosure of identity which is not only tied to the *moment* of participation, but reverberates into the future, as well as into spatialities that are not contained by the walls of the university. While, as discussed in chapter 4, we can see this as a queer perspective of time and space and a (re)production of an imagined future, Hui Ting's story adds a note of caution to this: when only certain people have access to these queer modes of imagination, whose queer futures are being imagined?

This delicate balancing of obvious participation, versus covert participation, versus no participation at all, particularly across borders, was further exemplified by Orla's work. Orla's group was conducted entirely online, and involved many students who lived at home and/or outside the UK, including countries where being LGBT+ is criminalised. Orla found many people who noted their interest in attending events or talking to other LGBT+ people, but also quickly realised that this proclaimed interest did not translate into actual engagement with the group. She had to create alternative approaches to negotiate between the comfort that sharing experiences can give, versus participants' needs to stay invisible for their own safety. Instead of having only online meetings or group chats, Orla and her committee also created a newsletter to go out to everyone in the society. People could contribute pieces to this newsletter anonymously or with their names attached, and could submit links to articles, photography, videos or podcasts that they found interesting. Orla said that she made sure that the newsletter did not *just* cover LGBT+ related topics, so it would not have been obvious to an outsider that it was a newsletter for the LGBT+ society. She also emphasised the transnational nature of the newsletter, saying that "it's just a way of making that society closer when we're so scattered all over the place".

It is clear that volunteers have to manage not just dynamics, politics and communication *internal* to their community, but also have to take into account how their communities are positioned within the university as well as the wider world, and how participation in a community can communicate an affiliation to individual LGBT+ identity. Moira and Evie both discussed their positioning within LGBT+ communities, as staff members who were not out to all of their colleagues and students. At the time of our interview, Moira was not out to colleagues or students, but she did occasionally attend LGBT+ staff meetings. However, she avoided the 'outing' effect of attending these meetings, due to her job being in student welfare. She said that other staff members might think that she's "just there just to keep up to date with wellbeing, or in

[her] professional role," rather than because of Moira's interest in LGBT+ issues due to her identification as a bisexual woman.

In this case, Moira's ability to engage in the space was not primarily defined by an assumption of shared experiences, but rather by her professional role. However, this was also preceded by her admission that she is "not super involved". Furthermore, it also highlights the need for at least *some* externally recognisable investment in the experience of LGBT+ people, to make one's presence intelligible: if she had not been concerned about LGBT+ students' welfare from a professional point of view *nor* from a personal point of view, her presence might have been questioned more.

Evie similarly noted that for her as a staff member, there was a particular worry about coming out to students. She discussed this worry in the specific context of staff-student LGBT+ community events. On one hand, these events were presented as a potential to bring the student LGBT+ community closer to the staff LGBT+ community. On the other hand, there was the potential for this to be an implicit coming-out of teaching staff members in front of their students, which Evie had previously mentioned not everyone felt comfortable with. The solution for this worry was to run the event in such a way that it would not *obviously, undeniably* constitute a coming-out. This was by holding events that were LGBT+ themed, but were explicitly presented as open to everyone, so attendance was not equated with personal identification.

Certainly, there is a need to estimate whether the potential connections over shared experiences are worth outing oneself for, even if this outing is ambiguous or comes with plausible deniability. This tracks with my own experience as an undergraduate. I chose to study in Brighton after seeing flyers for LGBT+ celebratory events (having previously been completely

unaware of the city's status as LGBT+ capital). I looked up the LGBT+ society at the university, and signed up at the Freshers Fair. I subsequently spent the next year on campus meticulously avoiding any official association with the society, worried that it would require/enact a certainty in my own identity that I did not yet have.

Participants were clearly aware of the problems with both internal and external pressure not to participate in LGBT+ communities. Some tried to work around it, or (like Moira) find ways to position themselves and others in such a way that participation is not directly linked to one's individual status as an LGBT+ person. However, there were recurring concerns by my participants about the ways in which these pressures informed the demographic make-up of the communities, which in turn performatively (re)iterated expectations about who could join these communities going forward. It is this demographic make-up which will be discussed in the next section.

5.3.2 Who is missing?

If university LGBT+ communities are 'communities of strangers', it is here that I want to elaborate on the complexities of figuring all LGBT+ people as equally stranger to each other or to the outside world. Rallying under the name of a singularly intelligible LGBT+ community, has the potential to radically reinvent the terms on which kinship and solidarity is built, by focusing on shared concerns and shared social positionality, rather than biolegal attachment (Cohen, 2005). At the same time, if the shared concerns are implicitly articulated from a Western, white, cisgender, male perspective, this notion of the singular LGBT+ community may also reaffirm normative power relations (Duggan, 1992; Cohen, 2019).

As mentioned in the methodology, I did not collect demographic data on participation in the various communities, and therefore do not know who might have 'actually' been in any particular

space at any particular time. However, it is still important to note that the LGBT+ communities were largely (and without prompting) *reported upon* as overwhelmingly homogenous in demographic make-up. For instance, Graham, Johanna and Hui Ting commented on the fact that there were very few out trans people in their communities, around half of the participants mentioned that their communities were predominantly white, and Frankie and Veronique noted that their groups were female-dominated and male-dominated respectively.

This tendency towards homogeneity was also echoed in the demographic makeup of my participants: although 19 people is by no means a large sample, it did prove incredibly difficult to find non-white participants despite explicitly advertising in/to groups that are made for LGBT+ People of Colour. It took specific targeting of staff networks to ensure that there was a roughly even split between staff and student, and even then most staff participants were in their twenties or early thirties. Only two of my participants identify as an ethnicity other than white (Hui Ting and Carmelita), and both are South-East Asian. Similarly, although several of my participants identify as non-binary, genderqueer and/or demigender, only one of my participants identifies explicitly as transgender.

This tendency to stick within groups of the same make-up was attributed to a variety of causes. Firstly, Frankie noted that this may be explained through the wider problem of particular universities and particular locations only attracting particular people. She used the ethnic homogeneity at her own university as an example in her explanation:

"It's probably the most un-diverse place potentially that you can be or county that you could work in [...] if you look around and don't see anyone that looks like you, I can totally understand that? So it's gonna take quite a lot to shift that I think. Unfortunately we don't have that diversity which I think is a massive issue because it means that we're not getting different perspectives."

-Frankie

Here again Frankie implicates participation into a (re)iterative performative process of familiarisation: because there is nobody there who is (visibly) of a minoritised ethnicity, minoritised people do not feel inclined to stay in these places. This means that nobody then becomes a figurehead that might interpellate people into recognition: a desire path requires someone to take the first steps, but if there is nobody who has walked this path before you, it may seem like there is nothing to step onto.

Archie took a slightly different approach to this process of familiarisation. They focused less on minoritised people's mere *presence* within the university, and more on the formal structures that govern LGBT+ spaces:

"[My] university does have a problem with systemic racism and so does society obviously. When you have the majority of students on your committees being white? It just reinforces that problem and as much as you talk and learn, it doesn't change anything until you have diverse people sitting on the committees?"

-Archie

Archie's argument here differs from Frankie's, as they locate the problem in the homogeneity of LGBT+ community *committees*, rather than a complete lack of LGBT+ people who belonged to racialised minority groups at their university altogether. Although they noted that the student society's issues were interwoven with the wider systemic problems within the university and

society as a whole, they emphasised the ability to access formalised *power*: it is not enough to simply have a conversation about the social and cultural prevalence of racism, there is a communicative function also in who is positioned as being able to start this conversation or lead it.

Carmelita similarly noted that her university served a highly diverse student body, including many LGBT+ students who belonged to racialised minority groups. However, this demographic difference became created/enacted in the differing ways that people were treated when they entered LGBT+ spaces. In fact, Carmelita noted that during their time on the committee, the student population of their university was "64% BAME[17]", but this was not reflected in who participated in the committees:

> "Yeah there's a lot of people in there that think that they shouldn't be thinking about intersections? Or have a lot of white privilege that they don't really think about [...] you know when, when someone looks at you and kinda just looks you up and down, asks you question [sic], kind of to draw you out. Stuff like that [...] so I understand why people of colour or LGBTQI+ do not wanna join that, that space. They don't want to be around people like that, you know."
>
> -Carmelita

Carmelita here notes how even the presence of a racialised body is seen as a communicative act, something that requires constant interrogation and explanation even in the most minute, everyday interactions (Puwar, 2004, p.50). Similar to Frankie's experience of 'ugh', and Sara Ahmed's experience of rolling eyes, the potentially 'small' or maybe even subconscious acts of looking and questioning are here understood as affective obstacles to participation. Where they

[17] BAME stands for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic. Although it is no longer used governmentally, this acronym was used in national statistical research on race and racism until 2021, and continues to be used frequently in non-governmental research and reports (Race Disparity Unit, 2022).

differ, however, is in the fact that Frankie and Ahmed describe interactions that cross from the in-group into the out-group, whereas Carmelita describes people she was ostensibly in a community of strangers with. It seems that there is even a somatic norm for who is intelligible *as* part of the community of strangers in the first place.

Carmelita contrasted this with an event she set up called Brown Girls Brunch. She described the atmosphere at Brown Girls Brunch as not emphasising or creating difference between the various participants ("the environment was just free, you just feel free, you can just be you"). The fact that for Carmelita 'just be[ing] you' is associated with gender/ethnic identification rather than LGBT+ identification, points towards an oft-examined dynamic within racialised LGBT+ spaces: for white LGBT+ people their LGBT+ status can be the most marginalising and therefore most notable aspect of their identity. For racialised LGBT+ people, on the other hand, it can be their ethnic, geographic, national, or religious identification which is their primary axis of belonging (Duggan, 1992; Clark, 2005).

In considering the difference that Carmelita notes between Brown Girls Brunch and the LGBT+ staff network, we can think of Nirmal Puwar's concept of space invaders: Puwar argues that even in spaces where technically everyone is welcome, there might still be an expectation of who is the 'natural' or 'ideal' occupant of these spaces, the somatic norm (Puwar, 2004, p. 8). When someone who does not conform to this somatic norm enters the space, they at once are marked 'out of place', *and* laying bare the unspoken rules that govern the space (Douglas, 1966, p.39). This is particularly uncomfortable within a space that ostensibly values diversity, as the marking of invisible barriers implicitly carries with it an accusation of hypocrisy. By pointing out the problem of a space (even if this is done simply through being present), one can become identified *as* the problem of this space (Ahmed, 2012, p.176). In Carmelita's case, one solution

was to create a new space where racialised bodies were not seen as signs of negative affect, but instead were naturalised as the new somatic norm (“you can just be you”).

While it was noted by some that racialised groups were generally not the somatic norm within universities, it was trans communities that were presented as particular targets for actively hostile treatment, especially within universities. Universities as institutions were not just presented as spaces where broader societal marginalisation was unthinkingly reproduced. Instead, universities were seen to actively use their influence as/on behalf of powerful institutions, in the marginalisation of trans people. Several participants brought up that staff within their institutions had contributed to transphobic discourse. Carmelita said that nationwide, there were instances of trans-exclusionary lecturers teaching at Higher Education institutions, and that one has to “be really careful of what they’re teaching students”. Scout mentioned a specific lecturer who had co-authored “a quite transphobic paper”. In response Scout’s LGBT+ student society drafted an open letter to make a case for this lecturer having to remove his name from the paper, as he was using his professional educational credentials to support a transphobic argument. Lastly, Veronique mentioned that, up until recently, she was unaware that a person in her department held trans-exclusionist views, until they explicitly positioned themselves on one side of the societal debate around trans people in academia.

Although I did not ask my participants about transphobia specifically, it is not unexpected that this was brought up a lot: the interviews were conducted from Autumn 2021 to Summer 2022. During this time, there were ongoing student protests at the University of Sussex around the professorship of self-proclaimed gender-critical feminist Kathleen Stock, whose work argues that nobody can materially change sex. These protests culminated in the Sussex branch of the University and Colleges Union calling for an investigation into structural transphobia, after which

Stock resigned (Adams, 2021a). This led to a media storm that reinvigorated sentiments that position trans-inclusivity in opposition to academic freedom (Horbury and Yao, 2020).

It makes sense, then, that if the 'free' university is imagined as a necessarily trans-exclusive space within popular discourse, my participants would go out of their way to address the falsity of this imagination. Indeed, a worrying and seemingly paradoxical trend has been identified, where the voices calling most publicly for the curtailing of trans people's bodily autonomy and public bodily presence, do so ostensibly in the name of feminism. However, these same voices ally themselves with conservative organisations who reinforce a traditionally-gendered somatic norm that is not only cis, but also white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and reproductive (Hines, 2020; Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020). Crispin's experience in particular, illustrated how the physical movement of trans people within the university was governed by a cisgender, binaristic, and gender-segregated somatic norm:

> "We've done some great strides with trans inclusivity, which is another example of moving slowly within an organisation. Simple things that we say 'well why don't we have gender neutral bathrooms?' was a massive conversation that went on for like two plus years. And you think 'gosh we don't feel we're asking that much?' You can even just repurpose an existing bathroom with literally a different sign and it's basically that already?"
>
> -Crispin

Crispin's story aligns with many of the other participant's narratives which position adequate LGBT+ bathroom provision as necessary for successful participation of LGBT+ students and staff in university life. Furthermore, it echoes the opposition of gender neutral bathroom provision as a key battleground in UK political culture wars (Department for Levelling Up,

Housing and Communities, 2023), especially when it comes to young people in education (Department for Education, 2023).

Significantly, in his story, Crispin addresses not just the norm itself as problematic, but also the effort it takes to question and change this norm. The slow pace at which change to the enforcement of this somatic norm happens, is itself part of dividing whose concerns are prioritised within the institution, and whose concerns are not. This emphasis on appropriate pace as crucial to full inclusion, is reminiscent of a paper by Tig Slater and Charlotte Jones, about bathroom access for queer, trans, and/or disabled people (Slater and Jones, 2021). In this paper they examine inadequate bathroom provision through Lauren Berlant's concept of 'slow death', where certain populations are not so much exterminated through immediate and physically violent action, but are rather slowly prevented from living full lives, through social exclusion in everyday ways (Berlant, 2011). Slater and Jones argue that lack of bathroom access functions to either keep people at home altogether, or forces people to restrict their food or drink intake while they are out. While quick action to ensure bathroom provision may not seem a priority to Crispin's university, those who are excluded from the university because they do not feel safe, comfortable, or able to access its bathrooms, may feel very differently about whether or not this is an urgent matter.

Of course, there were not just certain demographics who were missing from the communities themselves, there were also certain groups that were absent even in the *discussion* of these communities. One notable silence in the interviews was around class positioning. I had expected this to come up a lot more, given the fact that participating in voluntary work is so obviously restricted to those who have both the time and the financial freedom to take on unpaid work. Indeed, we did often talk about how much of a difference it would make for LGBT+ community work to be remunerated. However, this was either discussed in relation to the impact

it would have on workload, because people would not have to do voluntary work on top of their paid work, or remuneration was discussed as a way of formally acknowledging the value of LGBT+ volunteering[18]. So while many discussions revolved around *labour* relations within the university, class *identity* was never explored as something that might inhibit people from taking part in LGBT+ communities. Several participants (Deirdre, Alexa, Feliks, and Graham) noted working-classness as a potentially salient aspect of identity, either in their demographic forms or in conversation. However, this was always a one-off note, rather than a sustained engagement with class. Moreover, when class came up in conversation, it was always mentioned in the context of likening LGBT+ communities to other demographic groups in the university that may benefit from focused intervention of communal organising: for instance, in the same way that there were women's networks or BAME networks, it might be helpful to have a working-class network. Working-classness was therefore seen as marginalised within the university system, but not within LGBT+ communities specifically.

It seems that for my participants, the *intersection* of class and gender/sexuality was not as obvious a point for discussion as ethnicity and trans identity were. Both the marginalisation of working-class people in the university, as well as the silence around these communities in the interviews and focus groups, may be explained through the fact that LGBT+ communities have both theoretically and empirically been made visible only through a middle-class lens and middle-class language, both within academia (Brim, 2020) and 'on the scene' (Formby, 2017). This is compounded by the fact that the introduction of tuition fees, and the (more-than-)tripling of the fees from 2013 onwards, have made Higher Education an investment which many people cannot afford to partake in. Class, like LGBT+ identity, is another identifier that is not easily read 'on the skin', and furthermore might itself be impacted through one's education. Therefore,

[18] This will be explored in more depth in chapter 7.

people might need to explicitly assert their working-class background to be interpreted as such, as the baseline assumption is that LGBT+ communities are made up of middle-class people.

Similarly, during the interviews and focus groups there was very little conversation about neurodiversity and/or disability. There was discussion of mental ill-health and addiction issues as a *result* of homophobia and transphobia, but not as something that could be part of a long-term identity. Again, this is despite some of the participants noting in their demographic forms that they identify as disabled or neurodivergent. This too could be interpreted as a result of universities being hostile spaces for disabled and neurodivergent people altogether (Wilkinson, 2023). Indeed, in his discussion of 'compulsory able-bodiedness', Robert McRuer discusses how under capitalism workers are held up to a standard of productivity that is not even achievable for people who are able-bodied, and of course university spaces are not exempt from this dynamic (McRuer, 2013). Because of this compulsion towards productivity, it may be that participants did not move within networks where disability and neurodiversity were normalised.

Another explanation could be the fraught discursive positioning of LGBT+ identity vis-a-vis neurodiversity and disability: disabled and neurodivergent identities are frequently categorised as constitutionally 'other' to the traditional (re)production of gender, or upsetting this (re)production, in much the same way that LGBT+ identity is (McRuer, 2013; Jackson-Perry, 2020; Slater and Jones, 2021). This is most obviously evident in UK law, as gender dysphoria is still a medical diagnosis, and indeed trans people require medical evidence of dysphoria for a gender recognition certificate, in order to be legally protected as trans people under equality law ('Gender Recognition Act 2004', 2004; The National Archive, 2010). At the same time, the conflation of neurodivergence, disability, and gender/sexual identity has been used to actively argue that disabled and neurodivergent LGBT+ people are not 'really' LGBT+, but simply do not

have the capacity for self-identification (Toft, Franklin and Langley, 2020; Brooks, 2023). Simultaneously and paradoxically, disabled people are also often denied the possibility of a sexual life altogether, including a specific LGBT+ identification (Slater, Ágústsdóttir and Haraldsdóttir, 2018). Disability is therefore imagined as 'queer' in both the sense of odd and out-of-place, as well as sexually non-normative, but it is *not* imagined as LGBT+ in any identitarian or communal sense. Perhaps participants felt uneasy positioning LGBT+ identity as potentially intertwined with neurodivergent/disabled identities, because of the pathologising discourses in which these positionings might become embedded.

Altogether participation, belonging, and community within LGBT+ spaces were presented by the participants as parts of a performative vicious circle of (non-)participation: if particular groups were positioned as somatically non-normative in an LGBT+ community space, they were not as likely to feel like they belonged in the space, and were subsequently less likely to participate. This then meant that the community spaces retained their image as only appealing to this norm. Hereby, the LGBT+ people who did not conform to this norm, became a stranger among strangers.

5.3.3 Similarity and difference, comfort and discomfort

In chapter 4 I established that participants saw the existence of presumed shared experiences as a key structuring element of LGBT+ communities. This may seem like a straightforward call to replace the similarity that becomes (re)produced in normative families/homes, with a similarity that becomes (re)produced in LGBT+ communities. Yet, my participants' explicit focus on critiquing the homogeneity of their communities, shows that they had more nuanced ideas of how these communities should relate to notions of similarity and difference. Similarity and its resulting comfort, the 'sinking feeling' which makes the body seem at one with its surroundings (Ahmed, 2012), were problematised by my participants' narratives. Indeed, many argued that a

level of internal difference and diversity, including among those who were 'strangers among strangers', was necessary for the appropriate running of these communities.

An particularly meticulous comment on the comfort and discomfort that accompanies community diversity (and lack thereof) came from Hui Ting, who noted how a lack of diversity was indicated to her through a lack of tension:

> "The club that I was in, people were from very similar backgrounds. For example, nobody was trans or people were from a very small group of communities. So there wasn't any tension but it wasn't in a way that was good. It was more because there actually wasn't that much diversity in the group? So it's kind of the other way around where there was no diversity in the group [...] It was a strangely not-diverse group for what was supposed to be a group about diversity, I guess."
>
> -Hui Ting, focus group 2

Hui Ting here addresses the fact that the ability to fit into the community of strangers, can itself reify a very particular notion of what this stranger should look like. However, where the previous section focused primarily on the absence of particular groups of *people*, Hui Ting makes a link to the affective: she focuses on the absence of *tension*. This is similar to Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of happiness as equated with being a good 'fit' within an institution (Ahmed, 2006, p.156), and Sally Hines' concern that the recent rise in trans-exclusionary feminism in the UK, is "simply as the latest instance within a very long tradition wherein dominant women seek to, literally, construct feminism in their own image" (Hines, 2020). In Hui Ting's conceptualisation, a successful LGBT+ community should therefore not resolve tension, or reconstruct a community in a singular particular image. Instead, the tension that results from internal differences can be a politically good and useful feeling.

Hui Ting's experience provides a prompt for re-evaluating senses of belonging within LGBT+ communities - in much quantitative, intervention-oriented research, notions of belonging or recognition are implicitly positioned as good *because* they are comforting sensations (e.g. Vaccaro and Newman, 2016; Kulick *et al.*, 2017). However, as Hui Ting's quote illustrates, the comfort that comes with sameness can also be an indication that certain voices are not being heard, and societal exclusions are reproduced even within spaces that are 'supposed to be [groups] about diversity'.

Indeed, this idea that LGBT+ communities are 'supposed' to be about diversity and difference (regardless of whether they actually are) was often taken for granted in participant speech. Some participants focused on the term LGBT+ itself to explore this supposition. The fact that this is an initialism, rather than a word, was deemed indicative of a need to bring disparate groups together, rather than presuming a singular experience. Graham, for instance, talked about the importance of acknowledging that being in coalition with one another, or working together, does not equate to being the same. He exemplified this through a reference to the acronym LGBT+: "even with any of the letters, you've still got that range of human beings and I think that's important". Johanna, separately, also made the case for the acronym exemplifying a politics of coalition rather than straightforward *sameness*, as the letters represent some people but not others, and the plus sign symbolises a variety of other identities. However, rather than the acronym or the plus sign *reducing* a diverse group of people to a simple collection of letters (and thereby reducing it to sameness), she saw the term 'LGBT+' as an imperative to carefully consider difference, arguing that "if we can't tolerate each other's differences then we haven't got much hope really of expecting other people to tolerate our differences".

Both Graham and Johanna here defer to a kind of linguistic ontology, which seems to again lay bare a sense that particular communicative forms should be followed by particular actions:

LGBT+ communities are not just spaces where people are *supposed* to encounter and respect difference for ethical reasons, but *by the very nature of using this initialism* these communities only make sense through differences. This is particularly in light of the framing of the initialism as problematic within academic discourses: this problematisation tends to emphasise the inadequacy of an initialism to represent everyone within a community, as there is a fixed order and finite number of identities that can be described (e.g. Ghaziani, 2011; Vaccaro and Newman, 2016; Spencer and Patterson, 2017). In Graham and Johanna's narratives, however, the function of an initialism as a bringing-together of different terms and experiences, is exactly to create an imperative for collaboration.

Orla provided a further elaboration on this desire to treat LGBT+ experiences as non-monolithic. However, rather than putting this in necessarily demographic terms, they noted their dismay with the overrepresentation of particular 'types' in the society:

> "So I found originally I didn't have that much diversity amongst my committee members? I wanted to show people that anyone is more than welcome to join, but I obviously couldn't pick. I felt like I attracted a lot more of uh, a kind of the 'bisexual girl that has a boyfriend' type. Which is fine, but when you've got like ten of them it's quite…I didn't feel like they shared the range of different experiences that I wanted to support."
>
> -Orla

Notably, Orla does not only signal individual identity (bi women), but also aspects of relationships (bi women *with a boyfriend*) as a factor that impacts how someone is positioned. Similarly, she made explicit that it is not the demographics or relationships she has a problem with, but the fact that having *only* these groups was not representative of the broad experiences of LGBT+ people. This is also signalled through her use of the word 'type'. This implies that we

are here not talking *exclusively* about bi women with boyfriends as individual identifications or individual people who happen to fall into this category, but perhaps as a broader social way of being understood interpersonally.

Furthermore, Orla positions herself as potentially a ‘cause’ for the overrepresentation of this particular demographic. This is despite not belonging to this demographic herself, and despite this demographic not being what she would have ‘picked’ given the choice. Creating ‘diversity’ is therefore seemingly not understood as a clear-cut notion of like attracts like, or people gravitating towards those they *want* to be in community with. Clearly the way that people’s presence (inadvertently) signals safety, familiarity, and/or belonging for some and not others, is informed by social and interactional cues, rather than simply based on individual identification.

A similar reference to ‘types’ was mentioned by Frankie, in her story about being initially put off joining the LGBT+ community as an undergraduate student:

> “I went to university in London because I wanted to meet a range of people and I wanted a community. And I got there and it was potentially the most homophobic place I could have possibly imagined [...] It meant that people who were part of the LGBT groups at that time tended to be fairly out there and very political, and I just wanted a community of people? I turned into that political out-there person now, but I wasn’t quite ready at nineteen or whatever.”
>
> -Frankie

Frankie here notes the activist ‘persona’ as one that is interactionally/socially created, rather than pre-discursive. Furthermore, she describes it as one that she has moved in and out of identification with at different points in time, rather than the persona being immutable.

Particularly this notion of not being ready or willing to become attached to or identified with a particular interactional persona seemed to speak to the imagination of participants. Archie noted that the dogmatic adherence to one particular way of communication eventually stopped them from participating, and counterintuitively caused a "very fragmented' space". They mentioned that the tone of LGBT+ university organising "came from a real sense of academic prestige, in the sense that people would literally quote Judith Butler". Here it is not *just* the imagination of what an LGBT+ community looks/sounds like, *or* what a university looks/sounds like that constraints who feels able to participate in university LGBT+ communities. Instead, the two 'types' work together to form an even more specific kind of persona.

It is clear then that participants did not deem homogeneity within their communities helpful, especially when this homogeneity turned into a prescriptive 'type' to emulate. The ability to incorporate embodied and/or interactional difference within LGBT+ spaces, was seen as very important to the successful creation of LGBT+ community. This was framed both from a participatory point of view (people will stop participating if they feel the need to conform to something they do not see themselves as), but also from a conceptual point of view - an LGBT+ community was implied to stop *being* an LGBT+ community if it only catered to one particular demographic.

5.4 COVID-19 participation

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that campuses across England were closed, and networks that had previously met in-person had to move their activities online. Where this created challenges for participation in some aspects, others also used this change of format to explore ways of re-thinking aspects of their intended purposes, audiences, and collaborations, as well as redefining the boundaries of what it meant to participate.

5.4.1 Challenges - missing purposelessness

One of the main challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic that participants noted was a drop-off in attendees. This was partially because in many cases, simply less was organised in total. However, it was not solely the decline in *number* of attendees that participants identified as a challenge. Some participants noted that the lower number of attendees was also a result of a decline in *quality* of the interaction. However, this was not 'quality' as it is understood normatively - i.e. 'productive' or highly meaningful interaction. Rather, participants often centred informal or 'purposeless' communication as a key component of face-to-face spaces, that could not be replicated in online environments.

In terms of getting people to engage with the communities in the first place, Alexa noted that the online environment took the opportunity for incidental interaction away. She mentioned that if you have a physical stall on campus, people are more likely to engage "because it's right in front of them, they're already there". Participation here is facilitated through lowering the threshold of engaging in interaction, which for Alexa seems more possible in the offline world. By being 'already there', Alexa's community can make itself part of the naturalised surroundings, which means not having to ask people to go out of their way to *find* community. The community therefore provides the desire path onto which potential subsequent community members can step. Interacting online, on the other hand, would require everyone to make their own way to the community. Hui Ting noted too that her community needed to become creative with how they lowered this threshold of initial participation. One solution was for the community to provide an external incentive *outside* of participation/interaction: where these previously might have been the availability of snacks at the event, Hui Ting said that her group needed to pivot to sending people vouchers in the absence of a physical meeting space.

In terms of participation *after* the initial contact, there was also an issue in terms of *keeping* people engaged. For some, the hypervisibility of participation that social media brings with it, was more dangerous than the potential of being seen to participate in-person, as the cyberspace crosses over into the familial space, as Orla experienced in her transnational LGBT+ community. Furthermore, it was also the mode of engagement that seemed to be affected by online presence: online meetings are highly fixed in when and how they occur, making chance encounters or spontaneous conversations unlikely to occur. Furthermore, they are limited in the amount of so-called sideplay/byplay (Goffman, 1981) they allow: as only one person can speak at a time, it is not possible to have informal conversations alongside the 'main' discussion. Everything that is said must serve a clear purpose to everyone else in the meeting. For instance, Evie (29, staff, North East) noted that her staff network's meetings had almost solely been online because the network only started just before the pandemic. This meant that there was no opportunity to linger after a work call, as one quickly moves on to the next thing: Evie described it as "because you are working, as soon as you've logged off the Teams meeting or whatever it's like 'that's it done, I'm moving on to the next thing that I'm doing'."

Again, incidentality and flexibility seem to be key components of the 'something' that attracts people to an LGBT+ community, rather than any stratified or purposeful mode of engagement. This purposelessness became compromised when communities were forced to move online, leading both to a different quality of engagement, as well as a difference in who felt able to participate in the first place. However, this difference was not solely experienced in a negative way.

5.4.2 Opportunities - online community access

In chapter 4 we already saw that for Julian and Scout, the opportunity to meet online was a way to expand the scope of the society into the home space. This provided a new way of engaging that did not require people to be physically at the university, allowing for a community of strangers that transcends geographical proximity. Scout incorporated a disability justice perspective (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; The Care Collective *et al.*, 2020), in specifically noting how important it was to incorporate online community as a standard practice for those whose anxiety made it uncomfortable to meet in-person, or for those whose immunocompromised status made it dangerous to meet with too many people in a physical space. Orla too noted that for some people the online environment actually meant an ability to engage without disclosing one's name and/or face to others. This meant an opportunity for people to be 'together' in real time in cyberspace, without the possibility of being identified - something which would not have been possible in face-to-face settings.

As mentioned in section 5.3.1, Orla created a newsletter for her community participants, as not everyone felt safe to proactively participate on social media or group chats. Furthermore, Orla needed to disguise the newsletter as a more general cultural digest, to ensure that it was not obviously related to LGBT+ news. They mentioned that there were actually educational elements to this newsletter that would not have happened if they had had something *just* focused on LGBT+ identity. Similarly, Hui Ting noted that it was exactly the purposeful Zoom call that allowed her to organise external partnerships with business mentors for her LGBT+ business club. Part of her job was to screen potential mentors, as not all of them identified as LGBT+ ("a lot of it was to make sure they weren't homophobic, to be honest"), and being able to make a very quick, purposeful call meant that it was easier to communicate with people who had a busy working schedule.

Here, the efficiency and perceived professionalism of online communication were exactly what allowed Hui Ting to bring people *into* the LGBT+ space. This might have been more difficult to achieve with a less purposeful or more free-floating platform. Altogether, the move online during the pandemic has changed elements of communication in relation to who controls the direction of interaction. This control has meant that certain opportunities for engagement were lost, particularly those that rely on spontaneous or 'purposeless' interaction. On the other hand, it has also allowed people to have agency over their (digital) visibility and the exact level of participation that they feel comfortable with in any given space, and it has allowed for other contingencies to emerge.

5.5 Conclusion - creating and recreating community

Participation in LGBT+ volunteering is undoubtedly mutually constitutive of the imagination of LGBT+ communities. However, when these concepts are discussed, it remains necessary to ask what it is that is being made visible, whose participation is being aimed for, and what shape this participation is expected to take. Furthermore, it is pertinent to ask what effect these expectations have in terms of imagining, creating, and (re)affirming the boundaries and make-up of the community it is purportedly representing.

My participants showed a complex struggle with this notion: although visible participation was seen as an important step towards *instating* an LGBT+ community within the university (the 'something there' as discussed in chapter 4), there was also a sense that when this visibility came from the institution, it was inappropriate for this not to be followed up with tangible actions. Furthermore, participants were also mindful that the act of participation can have an outing effect which might put (potential) community members at risk. The COVID-19 pandemic laid

bare some of the ways in which participation was informed by the spatial shape that ‘community’ took, and required participants to be creative in their approaches for engagement.

Lastly, the various ways in which non-participation was experienced in relation to marginalised demographics *within* LGBT+ communities, both resulted from and were constitutive of LGBT+ communities’ internal somatic norms. The comfort and discomfort that came with either fitting or not fitting within these somatic norms, were seen to be indicative of whether the communities were fulfilling their implicit purpose of being coalitional groupings of people with a variety of experiences. Altogether, there seemed to be an acknowledgement that in the drive to be a successful community of strangers, there is a risk of being prescriptive in what this stranger can or cannot look like. Indeed, the chapter that follows will discuss how the selective ‘managing’ of LGBT+ community visibility by the university, delineates who or what is presented as ‘the’ university LGBT+ community. Furthermore, I will explore the extent to which institutional imagination of LGBT+ communities aligns with the experiences that my participants spoke about.

Chapter 6 - Representing community: sprinkling diversity, managing visibility

6.1 Introduction

“We’re not easily identifiable unless we stick a badge on our heads or something, but that doesn’t mean that we’re not here, and I think it’s important for any organisation to say ‘even though we may not see you, you belong here’.”

-Johanna

Someone’s choice of university can be heavily influenced by (presumed) knowledge about the university’s stance on LGBT+ inclusion - for instance, I decided to attend the University of Sussex partially because there was an established LGBT+ presence, and for many people I volunteered with this was also an active concern in their university choice. Similarly, as discussed in the previous chapters, the university is often figured in juxtaposition to the home and the family. Regardless of whether this juxtaposition ends up being accurate to the experiences of LGBT+ people, students and staff do enter an institution with particular expectations.

Expectations of what ‘university life’ is like outside of its educational merit, have become increasingly key to university branding. Much research has been conducted into how promotional materials have been affected by and constitutive of a neoliberalising trend within Higher Education, both in the UK and the US (Fairclough, 1995; Morphew and Hartley, 2006; Hartley and Morphew, 2008). Furthermore, as neoliberalism continues to usurp ostensibly radical or activist discourses too, there is an increased conflation of individual consumption with

community engagement and social activism (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012, p. 12). This has created an incentive for institutions to brand themselves and their services as socially conscious, progressive, and/or diverse, allowing students to 'invest' in political causes through their consumption of university life.

This has become particularly complex with the rise in (audio)visual online material, as universities do not just have to express the social/communal value of their specific brand through written language, but also need to place themselves within a visual promotional language. And of course, some things are more easily expressed visually than others. For instance, in their research on reports by Hong Kong-based universities, Deng and Feng note that the vast majority of images relate to STEM subjects. They argue that this might be because beakers, colourful fluids, algebraic writing and lab coats are distinct indicators of discipline and intellectual expertise, whereas the arts and humanities do not have such easy access to shared visual codes (Deng and Feng, 2022, p.22).

Similarly, sexuality and gender are not necessarily communicated through obvious visual markers. This is partially because LGBT+ identity is not visually read on the body in the way that other identities (race, disability) are commonly perceived to be (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 75)[19]. The visual language of LGBT+ presence is often decidedly indexical, with signs relying on context and connotation as much as (if not more so) semantic/literal expression to denote a particular group or identity. Indeed, there has been an increased uptake of a depoliticised 'queer chic' marketing and entertainment aesthetic as *only* an aesthetic instead of a defined commitment to

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[19] It should be noted here that neither Sedgwick nor myself are arguing for race or disability to be solely or entirely identities determined through bodily appearance. Similarly, people may be perceived as LGBT+ based on their bodily or visual appearance, without the need for verbal confirmation of the fact. However, 'disclosure' of a marginalised identity is *typically* (if wrongly and reductively) perceived to be visual in the case of race and disability, whereas an LGBT+ identity is *typically* perceived to be asserted through verbal communication.

LGBT+ communities (Gill, 2008). This highly aesthetic indexicality might well benefit from this lack of textual clarity, as this allows the attachment to LGBT+ communities to be discarded the moment it stops being marketable. This in turn both creates and reinforces a vision of ethical, social and communal commitment as being performed through individualised, one-off transactions (Hearn, 2012, p.27). This transaction requires minimal efforts, and efforts which (if necessary) can be redirected to other causes on a whim, as soon as the commitment becomes unfashionable. This individualised and one-off approach to diversity work stands in stark contrast to the sustained, collaborative *community* efforts that my participants speak of. If, as discussed in chapter 4, the point of community often lies in the active interactional *sharing* of experiences over time, it seems that this point is not captured when LGBT+ identity is seen as something to be transactionally bestowed upon an individual.

In this chapter, I will therefore explore the extent to which universities' outward communication about equality, diversity and inclusion work are reflective of my participants' experiences. I will start off by delving into how my participants described 'visibility' within the university (in its literal visual sense of the word) in the interviews and focus groups. In particular, I am interested in how my participants experienced 'visibility' ambivalently, both as something that could be helpful for new LGBT+ community members, and as something that could be cynically and strategically employed by the university. I examine this dynamic with specific reference to affiliation with the Stonewall employers scheme, and the particular role that Stonewall workplace accreditation holds within the imagination of both the universities and my participants. I will complement this by analysing the role of LGBT+ presence within university-authored material, and how this ties in with the ways these materials use notions of familiarity and strangeness to create the university 'brand' more broadly. Furthermore, I will consider how these materials can both reinforce and subvert traditional approaches to authority, as well as strategically moving between reinforcement and subversion. I will explore these multimodal constructions of the

university ‘brand’ through the analysis of student experience videos, and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) statements. These two genres[20] of university-authored materials were chosen because they are some of the most common materials that universities have on their websites, they are not discipline-specific, and they are ways for the university to represent itself both as a place of study and as a place of employment.

I have chosen to look at the University of Sussex, Goldsmiths College and King’s College London as case studies, because these were the universities I attended - and the choices that led me to attend *these* universities were not made in a vacuum. I decided to study at Sussex and Goldsmiths, in part due to their activist and left-wing student profile. Attending King’s College, on the other hand, was more of a strategic choice. I was at a point where I considered myself grounded enough in my friendships and communities that I did not feel the need to explicitly seek them out. King’s was a university whose image of academic prestige meant a higher chance of being able to get funding for my PhD research. Part of the data analysis lies therefore in being attuned to the kind of signs and discourses being utilised, and considering which ones I would have picked up on in making a choice of university to attend.

In analysing these materials, I will be paying particular attention to how the conventions of *genre* operate to create texts that can have seemingly paradoxical meanings. In fact, prior analyses of university prospectuses and lookbooks have found that these texts often semantically imply that universities provides a service to a community, while the multimodal effect of the text actually seems to be more promotional (Fairclough, 1995; Hartley and Morphew, 2008). However, with the rise of digital marketing and the decline of the physical prospectus, it is imperative to analyse how video material and interactive material (like websites) utilises the strengths of their respective mediums to conform to a particular genre expectations.

[20] I use ‘genre’ here in a specifically Faircloughian way, see chapter 3.

I will be focusing specifically on how genre functions to present information as natural or taken-for-granted, without specifying or problematising how this information has come about (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p.33), as well as considering the taken-for-granted-ness of *leaving out* particular kinds of information. I will explore how the promotional and policy discourses of student experience videos and EDI statements allow for brief 'sprinkling' of LGBT+ indexes within a (visual and/or written) text, without needing to commit to sustained, detailed or explicit actions of change. Indeed, I will argue that it is a key function *of* these genres to avoid prolonged engagement, as this would involve a laying-bare of labour divisions, as well as involving the need to address the potential negative experiences that students and staff encounter within the institution.

6.1.1 I want a dyke for vice-chancellor

As I was writing this chapter, part of the difficulty of structuring it seemed to be the inevitability of its conclusion - *obviously* universities do not use the 'real', everyday experiences of LGBT+ communities to advertise their courses. The entire reason why advertising can be so effective, is exactly because it is *not* a set of cold hard facts, but rather a carefully-constructed narrative aimed at persuasion (van Eemeren, Jackson and Jacobs, 2011). The genre of university-authored material, or even charity-authored material like the Stonewall badge, does not detail the everyday intricacies of community engagement, and neither does it claim to do so. *Of course* what we see on the website will be different to the everyday experience of my participants, if only because reflecting the students' everyday *is not what a university website is for*. Similarly, this being the only chapter focused on pre-existing materials rather than original research, also made it stand out methodologically and content-wise. In order to explain the rationale for including it anyway, I want to go on a slight tangent through the written word.

I want a president is a poem by Zoe Leonard, written in the context of the 1992 USA presidential race. Starting with the phrase “I want a dyke for president”, the poem lists various attributes that the first-person narrator would like a prospective president to have, including having no air conditioning, having had an abortion at sixteen, and having committed civil disobedience (Leonard, 1992). Altogether, the words “I want” are used sixteen times throughout the poem. This is mostly in reference to descriptions that will be applicable to a large percentage of US citizens, and none or very few (depending on, for instance, one’s interpretation of the line “I want a candidate who isn’t the lesser of two evils”) of the US presidents so far.

The turn of the poem occurs in the line “And I want to know why this isn’t possible.” which is the first sentence of only two which does not start with a straightforward “I want”. Instead of summing up demographics and experiences that a president could or should have, the ‘want’ here explores the epistemology and the limits of the imagination. Indeed, up until this point the continuous refrain of “I want” might sound petulant, but only so in a world where the presidency has been occupied by particular bodies, with particular experiences for so long, that this has become entirely naturalised in public discourse. To suggest a world where this link is *not* natural implies a fresh, pre-socialised, almost childlike engagement with the US political system.

Jack Halberstam warns us that the desire to be taken seriously may be “precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 6). *I want a president* is a poem that exactly does not want to be taken seriously, and that does not express a tangible or actionable desire, that does not want a repetition of the same ‘tried and true path’. It creates a hypothetical that could never seriously, genuinely come to fruition. This in turn, provides an interrogation of the incompatibility between the optics that govern the electoral system, and the everyday that this electoral system represents, oversees, and creates. This is most evident in the assertion that what the narrator wants is a president who has been deported

- a scenario which relies on the hypothetical president being a non-citizen, which is currently not legislatively possible. What it is that is being wanted then, is not a scenario where a dyke really *is* president, but a scenario where power is not held in a system that is built upon inaccessibility to all but a select few of the population.

Although the US presidency and the UK Higher Education system are an ocean apart, I am interested in this question of genre and expectation: to what extent is it reasonable to ask for representation within a construction that was never meant to be representative of the people of whom it is made up? And even if it is not reasonable, should the question still be asked *in order to* discuss how this construction fails the people that inhabit it? In the following chapter I will use a queer turn to the unserious, petulant and childlike attribute of continuously asking how and why these values are constructed as inevitable and taken-for-granted (Halberstam, 2011, p. 147), and what values have necessarily been discarded to arrive at this inevitability.

6.2 Visibility within the university

The creation of comfort through visibility, has been the focus of much prior research into LGBT+ life within the university space. For instance, various studies by Susan Rankin and Jason Garvey emphasise the need for LGBT+ visibility in the curriculum and in individual teaching staff as role models (e.g. Garvey and Rankin, 2015; Garvey *et al.*, 2018). This research implicitly works from a presumption that seeing someone affiliate themselves with LGBT+ identity/community, automatically eases the ability for those observing to engage in this affiliation too. Indeed, in the West knowledge itself has been constructed primarily as occurring in/through visual observation (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001), to the point where communal, oral or tactile modes of knowledge are seen as of lesser value than visual modes of communication like images and writing (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.17). It is no wonder then, that the

language of visibility speaks to the imagination of LGBT+ people - it is the primary language through which one is expected to make themselves recognisable, through which one becomes intelligible as ‘real’.

It makes sense then, that when we discussed the term ‘visibility’ and its derivatives (‘visible’, ‘visibly’) in the interviews and focus groups, participants were unanimously in agreement that this was something straightforwardly positive. Frankie, for instance, described the merits of visibility by relaying the story of being contacted by a student from a university she’d left two years prior. The student expressed his thanks for a lecture that Frankie had given, saying that it had changed his life after previously not thinking it was a possibility to ever be out. Marcela also argued for the necessity of formal visibility of LGBT+ people in the curriculum, arguing that having a more diverse module selection would allow people to “see themselves in what they study”.

In using the language of people needing to ‘see themselves’ in their studies, Marcela interprets institutional visibility as providing a reflection of people who are *already there*. This was not just deemed important for LGBT+ students, but also for those who will inevitably go on to interact with LGBT+ people. For instance, Graham positions the university as having an institutional, educational obligation to incorporate LGBT+ people, but specifically focused on how this may benefit those who are *not* LGBT+:

> "When you run into someone who [...] doesn't know something around LGBT issues, where were they framed, what experience have they had before, have they run into this before even? Universities are teaching environments, they're research environments [...] really we're trying to generate and pass on knowledge and learning of various types and some of that should be around working with diverse communities and we should be reflective of that."
>
> -Graham

Marcela and Graham here use visibility as an allegiance to truthful *description* of the student body and the world: because there are LGBT+ people in class and outside of class, the university has a responsibility to faithfully show this presence in the curriculum.

In addition to this descriptive function, visibility was also interpreted as having a *performative* constitutive function, in that it enacted an ability to gather LGBT+ students or attract *new* LGBT+ students and thereby change the internal relations or the makeup of the student body. When asked what she sees as the goals or aims of her staff network, Carmelita argued that institutional visibility could be a powerful catalyst for community involvement:

> "Definitely inclusivity, and supporting the university to create a more inclusive space for everyone and running events that will create awareness. Being proactive and being visible to students and staff as well, to encourage them to be a part of the community."
>
> -Carmelita

In Carmelita's conceptualisation, visibility is tied to the presence of *people.* However, when Archie described making their choice of college, they placed a lot of importance on the visual sense of safety they experienced as also evidenced by the *objects* they saw around them, most notably the rainbow flags that were put up in the space where their college interview was being held. It is therefore not just the immediate *presence* of other LGBT+ people which needs to be

taken into account in an analysis of university visibility. There are also codes and conventions that imbue inanimate objects with the power to signify the 'imagined' LGBT+ community within the university, both descriptively and performatively: in Archie's quote, the rainbow flag was both a descriptive sign of a pre-existing LGBT+ community on campus, as well as performatively creating this community by attracting new students onto the campus.

As will become clear throughout the chapter, there is a difference in the extent to which universities are willing to visibilise people versus objects. Although participants did pick up on this difference and discussed this critically in their interviews and focus groups, both visibility as enacted through people and visibility as enacted through objects were in the first instance described in positive terms. However, as the conversations moved away from the literal word 'visibility', the discussions became more nuanced, and less exclusively optimistic. Participants were particularly sceptical of how LGBT+ visibility was used communicatively. They questioned who was able to wield this communicative act (the communities themselves or the university), and who was designated as the intended audience (again, the LGBT+ students and staff already present at the university, or potential new students).

For instance, participants noted that LGBT+ communities were limited in their potential to visibly provide or showcase their presence within the university. They were often dependent on the university providing access to institutional platforms, or prioritising them within communication and policy. If this provision and prioritisation did not happen, their visibility was curtailed. Orla, for instance, mentioned that it is common for professional organisations in her field of study to have diversity and inclusion panels at open days. Yet this was not something she ever saw at her university, or something that her society was ever invited to. Furthermore, she described that it took "maybe eleven emails that progressively got more and more blunt and edgy" to get student services to send around an announcement for the newly-formed LGBT+ student society.

At first Orla presumed that student services simply did not share information about societies, until she received an email notifying her that there was a gardening student society. Evie too noticed that members of her staff network were purely recruited based on word-of-mouth, as the EDI section of digital staff newsletters is at the very bottom of the email. Evie emphasised that her own department did not even know that they had staff networks.

Evie and Orla describe encountering difficulties in getting their communities to be noted in the first place. In her interview, Hui Ting went even further, and questioned whether institutional visibility should be celebrated altogether. She commented on how the difference in power between the institution and the community can also affect what visibility was seen to *do*. Although she did not have a hard time getting the word about her community out there, she instead found that LGBT+ communities are made visible very selectively. In her case, there was very little institutional support for the student society throughout the majority of the year, until Pride month[21], where "suddenly they wanted [the society] to be everywhere". Hui Ting described struggling with this highly selective use of institutional visibility, which also brought with it certain institutional responsibilities.

Graham, on the other hand, provided a counter-example. He argued that the power dynamic between LGBT+ community and institution could be subverted and reversed as well. He gave the example of agreeing for his LGBT+ network to be in the university brochure, and using this visible, public support for LGBT+ causes to hold the university to account:

> "If we can get the university to make noises about 'yes we support this' you can then ask them to back that up when needed, to say 'you said you value this, what are you doing?'"
>
> -Graham, focus group 2

[21] Pride month is generally celebrated in June in the UK.

Hui Ting and Graham both provide a cynical view of university visibility, both working from the presumption that a university may *communicate* that it cares about LGBT+ communities without this being reflected in its values or actions. At the same time, to Graham at least, the cynically strategic employment of this communication does not necessarily rob it of all its practical purposes: LGBT+ communities can find ways to hold universities to account, and act similarly strategically on this communication of care.

A particular point of frustration was therefore the moment where institutions were *inconsistent* in their communication. Some participants encountered universities that might communicate a certain set of values, but were then unresponsive when LGBT+ communities appealed to these values. For instance, in the following quote Archie expresses their discontent with their university's desire on one hand to incorporate LGBT+ communities into the institutional image, while on the other hand acting in ways that are detrimental to these communities:

"I think [universities] often underestimate the value that staff networks and societies are bringing to them, in like bringing students to them? [...] We've seen this absolutely just enraging situation of them protecting the free speech of intensely transphobic or bigoted people who are professors, and not taking any active stances on that and in fact promoting them. So it's just like, that doesn't gel, right? These two things cannot coexist, if you want to benefit from the free labour of all these people who are doing great things for our community? Like put your money where your mouth is too and take action at the highest levels [laugh]."

-Archie

Archie's experience speaks to the non-performative function that university communication may have (Ahmed, 2012). The institutional image of a university as caring for LGBT+ communities

may *imply* a performative function. It may suggest that in communicating this care, something is fundamentally changed about the way the university operates. However, when this communication does not easily translate to a tangible, practical *responsibility*, the mere communication of care might be where this performative function ends. One index which was discussed as especially susceptible to this dynamic, was my participants' universities' affiliation to the charity Stonewall. In the next section I will therefore explore how indexes related to Stonewall were alternatively taken up and rejected by universities, depending on the media discourses surrounding the charity.

6.3 Stonewall as an arbiter of diversity

The Stonewall employer scheme (also called Diversity Champions) is a scheme aimed at providing guidance to employers, to make workplaces more inclusive of LGBT+ people (Stonewall, 2020). As part of this scheme, every year Stonewall releases its Workplace Equality Index, a top-100 list of the most LGBT+ friendly employers. Part of the Stonewall application for universities tends to revolve around the desire to earn a high place on the index (Calvard, O'Toole and Hardwick, 2020). While my participants generally talked about accreditation by and affiliation with Stonewall in positive terms, they were also critical of how this could be employed selectively and strategically. In this section I will explore how the visual and communicative functions of Stonewall accreditation is differentially interpreted depending on the context in which the accreditation (or lack thereof) is presented. I will consider both the symbolic value of Stonewall accreditation, as well as considering how accreditation submission impacted everyday workload.

6.3.1 The politics of (dis)affiliation

Several of the staff participants (Carmelita, Suzie, Evie) noted participation or accreditation through the Stonewall employer index as an effective way to measure, instate, or outwardly show a university's commitment to diversity. Indeed, Stonewall was the only external organisation cited as being an authority on general LGBT+ matters (although charities *Just Like Us* and the *Albert Kennedy Trust* were mentioned in relation to secondary education and homelessness, respectively). All participants who brought up participation in the scheme considered a high ranking on the index to be symbolically valuable.

Although the Diversity Champions scheme is specifically aimed at measuring how LGBT+ inclusive universities are as places of *employment*, staff members tended to bring up the ranking as something that might send an important signal of inclusion to *students*. They noted that students might come to the university exactly because it would be a safe place to explore their identity, and that the Stonewall badge might be an indicator of this safety. Evie gave an example of how this worked in her university:

> "We found a lot of our students have looked for the recognition badge through different universities, that's why they've applied to go there? Because again it's visibility that we are accepting. And so this has helped quite a lot with our international students, many of whom come from countries where it's illegal, so to come to the university to then be able to feel safe enough to come out and have that acceptance has been fantastic."
>
> -Evie

Note here as well that Evie specifically mentions students who have come from particularly homophobic spaces. Evie here seems to argue that the Stonewall badge does not have an *intrinsic* performative value, or a commonly-understood referent in particular actions of

regulations. Rather, Evie notes that the badge *gains* meaning through the context in which it is encountered. It makes sense then, that to many staff participants the criteria that inform ranking on the Stonewall index informed the direction that the staff network should go into, or the main goal that occupied volunteering for the foreseeable future.

However, the importance of Stonewall to students does not seem to be reflected in the university material. Any affiliation with Stonewall at all was only ever mentioned on EDI pages (and only on those by Sussex and Goldsmiths), and not in student experience videos. The Sussex and Goldsmiths pages both merely note that their institutions are affiliated to Stonewall. They link to more information on what this conceptually means, but do not go into detail on how this is expressed within the institution in particular. On the KCL pages it was not noted, and one actually needs to go to the website of the staff networks (which is under a different domain name) to find out that KCL is affiliated with Stonewall at all (Proudly King's, no date).

On a superficial reading, the interviews with students seem to corroborate that Stonewall affiliation is not a major factor in students' imagination of 'university life': with the exception of one student, none mentioned Stonewall at all, let alone presenting it as the primary reason to attend a particular university. The singular student reference to Stonewall, however, did speak volumes about the complex communicative function that Stonewall affiliation (or lack thereof) possesses. Namely, Veronique was concerned with her university's intention to *disaffiliate* from the Stonewall scheme. She tied this explicitly to the proliferation and visibilisation of open transphobia within the university:

"There's been that sort of debate going on and all the horrible TERFs[22] have come out to lobby against and everything, including someone in my department which isn't great. I never knew that."

-Veronique

This withdrawal of the scheme is embedded in the cultural, political, and mediatised context in which Stonewall is located: in recent years, Stonewall has been caught up in a media storm that has affected its public image. This has particularly focused on the organisation's continued inclusion of trans people in its charitable aims. The result of this has been disaffiliation from the employer scheme by several prominent employers nationwide, including the BBC. In the university sector, this has led to UCL and LSE (among others) starting a process of disaffiliation from the programme and from Stonewall as a whole (Adams, 2021b; Chisambi, 2023). This was preceded by an upsurge in public hostility around trans people's presence in academia, equating trans-inclusive research and teaching with a lack of academic rigour, or figuring trans people as a threat to academic freedom (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020; Slater, 2023). Both UCL and LSE drew criticism from their respective LGBT+ student and staff groups who were not consulted on the decision. Furthermore, the reasoning and decision-making process that led to the disaffiliation was not made public for students and staff to comment on.

Veronique's narrative therefore shows the complexity of what it is that Stonewall affiliation communicates. Affiliation is not necessarily a noteworthy positive for students. However, *discontinuing* this affiliation was seen as resulting from (and itself strengthening) a strategic deference to society-wide trans-exclusionary discourses. Staff participants similarly had criticisms of the ways that universities strategically employed Stonewall affiliation. These criticisms often revolved around the divisions of workload, and as such it is the labour *behind* the Stonewall submission which will be discussed in the next section.

[22] TERF is an acronym, and stands for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist.

6.3.2 Stonewall submissions as under-valued labour

Staff, too, felt the reverberations of negative media attention around Stonewall. For some of the participants, this translated into managerial decision-making on Stonewall affiliation, which did not take into account the work that had already been put into facilitating this affiliation. Evie, for instance, brought up that in recent years the media focus on Stonewall meant that her network felt the need to re-establish among itself and among students whether they would still even participate. Similarly, Suzie noted that she put a lot of work into writing an application for the scheme, only for the university to decide that they would not participate after all. She described this action as an unexpected one, feeling like the university “pulled the rug from under us”. Suzie also noted that it was particularly important to her to apply, because the university already had participated in diversity schemes around gender and disability, and she felt that non-participation in Stonewall would communicate that LGBT+ causes were not taken as seriously in the realm of diversity, as other minoritised axes of identity.

This frustration around Stonewall affiliation being (potentially) discontinued, was linked to wider concerns around who does the administrative work involved with this award, and how/whether this work is recognised. Carmelita noted that while the Stonewall submission was successful and a good way to measure progress within the organisation, the only way that the university was able to adhere to the deadlines for submission, was by staff working beyond their remit. Frankie noted a similar disjunction between Stonewall as a way of outwardly indexing LGBT+ presence, versus the internal lack of recognition around the work that LGBT+ volunteers do:

> “We’re not asking for much [...] It’s just acknowledgement of the work that goes on to make the workplace or the university more inclusive? Which everyone benefits from? Not just people that are part of the community? You know and the university are quite happy to shout about it if they get the Stonewall thing.

We haven't gone for that, but you know they're quite happy to shout about things like that when it suits them, but you don't get the acknowledgement of the work that goes into that."

-Frankie

Edward also mentioned that when his university had done particularly well in the index several years prior, including a note of the positive impact of the staff network, this had been largely due to the work of one individual. This person left their job, a decision which in Edward's narrative was closely tied to the lack of recognition they received for this diversity work. Subsequently, the university plummeted in the ratings, and involvement with the staff network dwindled. Edward's anecdote specifically highlighted how participation in Stonewall submissions require *continuous* (rather than one-off) work, and that despite the highly regulated, administrative nature of this work, it is not always recognised as valuable by the university. Edward's story shows how Stonewall accreditations may circulate as a (presumed-)performative, rather than a descriptive symbol: by showing that an institution is affiliated, it is expected that the institution is *doing* something or communicating a particular action, even if the details of these actions are not made clear. It may therefore be that 'the university', institutionally, is not doing anything other than housing the voluntary work of a singular person.

Altogether, participants were also keenly aware of how Stonewall affiliation could be variously used by the university to index itself as an inclusive place, up until the point that this accreditation became more publicly and politically fraught. This potential for universities to pick up and drop this affiliation at will, was particularly reflected in the fact that managerial decisions around affiliation were not made with the consultation of student and staff networks. Furthermore, these decisions were made in such a way that left participants' work unacknowledged and thereby institutionally un-valued. This feeling of doing work that was *used* but not *valued* by the university, was a recurring theme in my participants' discussions of how

their universities portrayed themselves outwardly. In order to look more closely at how institutional image is employed, and to what extent it foregrounds the everyday work of university volunteers, I will now turn to a discussion of two (multi)media genres in which the institutional image can be asserted: the student experience video, and the EDI statement.

6.4 Institutional image - student experience videos and EDI statements

In the following section I will examine how LGBT+ campus presence is constructed as part of the 'student experience'. I do this by using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to analyse videos for the University of Sussex, Goldsmiths College, and King's College London. I will contrast these with EDI statements from the same university, arguing that indexes of (gender/sexual) diversity are used disparately in the two genres: on one hand, the videos use these indexes as part of a promotional discourse to create an attractive, consumption-based student experience. On the other hand, the EDI statements construct LGBT+ equality, diversity and inclusion as something that is primarily achieved in the realm of policy, rather than through interpersonal/communal interactions.

Furthermore, I argue that the lack of insight into the production processes of any of these documents allows for the universities to present seemingly-coherent, solely-positive and highly consumption-focused images of themselves that have an undeniable promotional effect. At the same time, the integration of these documents into particular genre conventions, disguises the partiality of the videos and statements through their form. This has the effect of giving an impression of LGBT+ communities that is radically different to the experiences which my participants relayed.

6.4.1 Sussex - peeking behind the carnivalesque

As will become evident, the universities make much use of their institutional image. This is often tied to the image of the cities they are located in. The student experience video for the University of Sussex, for instance, forms the introduction to their page about student life in Brighton (University of Sussex, 2023a), and in this video it is the city which takes centre stage. The video contains rapid montages of the Brighton cityscape, edited in time to the beat of a non-diegetic background track. It is the only video of the three not to feature any people speaking directly to camera, and indeed it does not feature any discernible speech at all. Where there is sound that is supposed to coincide with the diegesis of the visual information (a cricket ball being hit, a crowd cheering, the sea crashing onto the shore), these sounds are isolated from any environmental/background noise and amplified, becoming hyper-real and alienating the viewer from the space that the video presents, before quickly moving on to the next shot.

We never focus on one person or one setting, and shots are not spatially coherent - we rapidly cut from one place to the next, rather than getting a sense for how we are moving through space. Those familiar with Brighton and its surrounding areas know that between shots, the viewers are moved kilometres away, from the beachfront to the Brighton Albion football stadium. While the onslaught of images is visually overwhelming, there is no sense of gradual *immersion* into the space, or having a process of this space becoming familiar. By presenting the shots as a series of juxtaposed images rather than a linear narrative, we are shown the city in a similar way as one would show an abstract concept or an object (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 79): the overwhelm and strangeness of Brighton forms part of the city's very essence.

Indeed, Brighton is portrayed as a carnivalesque landscape, where authority, status, and history (qualities usually associated with the longevity of institutions, including universities) are playfully

undermined: a stern-looking statue is spruced up with an ill-fitting woolly hat, plain walls are graffiti'd, and a carnival of lights emanates from the famous Brighton pier. This portrayal is consistent with how Brighton has historically been imagined and branded: a space for people to temporarily escape or suspend the rules of everyday life, and entering into a world of leisure (Shields, 1990; Browne and Bakshi, 2013). In a landscape where the unusual is familial and the familial becomes unusual, no wonder that a community of strangers might feel welcome here.

The sense of a 'student experience' as an all-encompassing one, is also in line with the university's 1960s origins (Beloff, 1968): indeed, the report that gave rise to this generation of universities, exactly emphasised that universities should function like integrated communities in themselves, that educational institutions should organise themselves so that "neither teachers nor students feel themselves mere parts of an impersonal machine" (Lord Robbins, 1963). This was intended to ensure that both spatially and intellectually, there was an integration of the university with its surrounding community. Yet, in the video this student life never takes on a particularly educational or communal slant, rather than a purely consumption-based one. One could easily mistake the video for an advert from the city tourist board: the only things that tie it to *student* life specifically, are its location on the Sussex website, and the logo we see at the very end.

This seems to affirm the notion of the 'student experience' as one that is primarily about the consumption of new experiences (Hartley and Morphew, 2008; Palmer, 2015). Indeed, many of the shots in the video pertain to leisure activities that require some sort of transaction - shopping in the Lanes, eating from food trucks, going to music gigs or watching a football match. Brighton is presented as one large Third Place, where the familiarity of home space is replaced with a never-ending series of new, transactional, experiences.

fig. 1 - Video screenshot of a statue with a yellow woollen hat

However, although the carnivalesque space has the potential to temporarily upset normative power structures, it is exactly this temporarity that also integrates it into the *re-establishment* of these same normative power structures: we know that the statue will outlive the hat, that the graffiti'd wall is more likely to be painted over than torn down completely. Toying with signifiers of normativity is not the same as destroying them completely, and might in fact make these signifiers more palatable. This re-establishment of normative power structures is particularly evident in the way that the video indexes LGBT+ community presence. Among these indexes is a mural, which is visible about halfway through the video. It is a Banksy painting, titled *Kissing Coppers*, which seems to satirise the violent and hypermasculine historical tension between police and LGBT+ communities by showing two policemen in a passionate embrace.

fig. 2 - Video screenshot of the Banksy painting 'Kissing Coppers'

While an illegal use of space and a provocation towards police power, it also feels like a prime example of the 'sprinkling' of appeals to same-sex attraction to imply subversion without getting to the root of the matter: far from a destruction of the establishment altogether, Banksy has in fact become canonised as a financially lucrative street artist. So much so, that his murals are regularly protected *from* harm in the public space, rather than themselves forming part of the public space (Johnston, 2018). Furthermore, *Kissing Coppers* in particular functions as a satire only when LGBT+ identity is imagined to be some sort of cosmic, ironic punishment for homophobia. By merely showing two cops kissing, the joke seems to be as much on same-sex desire as spectacular and laughable, as it is on the police as an institution.

The rest of the video is also devoid of any communal LGBT+ activity. Although we see rainbow flags in the background and one full shot of a rainbow mural, the actual Pride parade is suspiciously absent. This is remarkable as Brighton Pride is one of the biggest Pride parades in the country. Furthermore, Brighton was also home to the first ever Trans Pride event in the UK

(The Argus, 2013; Trans Pride Brighton, 2023).[23] Pride parades are decidedly *people'd* activity to take part in, given that their entire purpose is to show the coming-together of LGBT+ communities through *masses* of people, rather than as individualised endeavours. Moreover, many community initiatives use Pride parades as a focal point for their fundraising, networking, and awareness efforts. In a video that does index the history of Brighton as a city of spectacle, the overlooking of one of its biggest, most spectacular, but also most community-oriented events in the calendar, seems intentional at the very least.

Clearly, same-sex attraction is implied to be part of the very landscape of Brighton, but it is also literal surface-level decoration in the form of flags and murals, rather than any deeper or more extensive engagement. Certainly, it is not shown to be embodied in people, organisations, or interactions. By relegating this attraction to the realm of decoration, it is rendered safe and static for observation. Indeed, it is perhaps the very impossibility of seeing a mural or a flag speak back, that makes them so fitting for the genre of a promotional video.

fig. 3 - Video screenshot of a rainbow mural with two hands shaking

[23] Although there are many legitimate criticisms to be made of Brighton Pride and Pride parades more generally, in particular their role in the commodification and spectacularisation of LGBT+ communities (see Browne, 2007 for an analysis of Brighton Pride specifically).

Altogether, both formally and content-wise the video employs an irony that allows it to position itself against authority, without having to show what an anti-authoritarian stance actually involves. Despite making passing visual reference to LGBT+ identity and community, this is divorced from the actual people that an LGBT+ community would involve. Instead, these visual signifiers are presented as yet another decorative or indulgent aspect of the city, part of what makes Brighton an unending Third Place where people might have *shared* experiences of strange(r)ness, but do not involve themselves in the process of *sharing* these experiences with one another. Where the 'something there' described in chapter 4 was decidedly about human connection and the process of sharing experiences or passing down knowledge, this element of interconnection is entirely absent from the Sussex video.

The Sussex EDI page (University of Sussex, 2023b) is the most extensive EDI page out of the three universities. It is not contained to a static, singular statement, but instead functions more as an interactive landing page. In contrast to the video, it is primarily word-based rather than image-based: it provides explicitly named contacts and links to further information and resources for people of particular protected characteristics. There are in fact no images of individuals or groups at all, the only images on the page are the banners of the various equality charters that it is a part of. The choice to include specialised and functional images rather than decorative ones, gives the page a sense of maturity and professionalism, as opposed to the leisure of the videos (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.16). Although the number of links is extensive, the amount of information that each link leads to is limited, and remains within the language of policy. This again seems to present community as a commodity, something that is already present and provided, (in this case as part of policy rather than the student experience) rather than people'd.

For instance, when clicking on the link that says ‘more about our equality charters’, the page that it redirects to uses the language of protected characteristics, to talk about the groups that it would like to “reduce the gap in representation, experience, progression and reward” for. This is followed by the list of groups as it is phrased in the Equality Act 2010, in the exact same order as the Equality Act. This language continues to be used, even though there are certain protected characteristics that the university has not joined a charter for (i.e. age), and there are certain staff and student groups that are not explicitly protected under the Equality Act (i.e. carers). This disjunction seems to point to the page’s function as being more concerned with showing adherence to a legal framework, than actually reporting on what it is the various charters mean for an everyday learning and working context, or what it is that the various networks and working groups are working on/towards.

A glimpse into this working process is given under the tab *LGBTQ+ Self-Assessment Team*, which is responsible for “defining the priorities and monitoring the progress of the University’s LGBTQ+ Inclusion Action Plan”. Feedback from staff and students, and feedback from the university’s Stonewall submission are included in this action plan, as well as practical steps towards improvement. However, this action plan is still framed in the context of the aim “for the University of Sussex to be a top 100 employer within the Index by 2025” (University of Sussex, 2023c), rather than focusing on how the university is experienced on a day-to-day basis by employees and students.

The only break with this policy-based language is under the tab of the ‘Trans and Non-Binary Staff Network’ (TNB), where the network has provided a link to a statement released in July 2022, about how to be an ally to trans/non-binary people. The opening line of the statement reads “Some of you have recently asked us how you could better support TNB staff members and students at Sussex”, implying that allyship is particularly necessary at this university. This

may be with good reason: Sussex was the centre of a media storm around transphobia in the Higher Education sector, particularly in relation to the employment of Kathleen Stock, a self-proclaimed gender-critical feminist (Adams, 2021a). The framing of the statement reveals the interesting space in which staff networks operate both on behalf of the university, and in conflict with them: on one hand, the statement does not disclose any transphobic incidents or structures within the university, nor does it refer explicitly to the media attention the university received in this regard. This seems in line with the other parts of the EDI landing page, which all seem an extension of university promotional strategies to show the university in a legally and ethically good light. On the other hand, the page is clear to state that "the statement does not constitute a policy position on behalf of the University". This line confirms that the staff network has a vision that may be separate to the managerial side of the university, and potentially even implying that the policy position of the university is not adequate in the eyes of the staff network. This schism in both language (of support, rather than policy) and affiliation (to the staff network or the university) create a miniscule crack in the facade of the university website as solely and solidly a promotional effort.

Presumably though, there is still this 'gap in representation, experience, progression and reward' that the university's EDI Unit is tasked with reducing. Yet what exactly this gap consists of, or how it is experienced, is unclear, as there is no place on the entire EDI landing page, which explicitly mentions what it is that is *not* diverse, equal, or inclusive about the university at the moment. Even in the action plan and the TNB network statement, there is no explicit mention of anything that is experienced negatively within the university. Instead, all feedback is phrased as a recommendation going *forward*, allowing the university to not have to disclose anything that might have happened in the *past*.

This focus on the happy future that the University of Sussex promises through its EDI page can be analysed through writing by Sara Ahmed and Francesca Sobande, who analyse the forward directionality of happiness and advertising, respectively. Ahmed describes how happiness is often figured as not just an endpoint, but *the* endpoint that everyone aims for (Ahmed, 2011, p. 163). This firstly obscures how the promise of happiness can be discursively used to justify any means to get there, and secondly it obscures how the image of happiness can itself be used as a means - for instance, in creating a 'happy image' of a university. Sobande similarly analyses the future-oriented focus of seemingly socially engaged advertising (Sobande, 2019). She describes how the use of language like 'change' or 'bravery' imply a break with an oppressive past without providing any detail about how this break has been achieved, or whether this break has taken place to begin with. The Sussex EDI page too is guilty of operating in this relentlessly forwardly-oriented way, where the emphasis on happy futures obscures and prevents a critical look at how the present has come to be constituted.

On the surface, it may seem that the student experience video and the EDI page are very different: they work within two different discourses, that of leisure and that of policy, corresponding to the different genres in which they are located. In turn, the entrenchment in these discourses results in two very different approaches to (visual) indexes of LGBT+ diversity: one very visually extravagant and carnivalesque, and the other businesslike and factual. However, these different aesthetics hide a strikingly similar approach to LGBT+ community as something that should be indexed as always-already *provided and ready to be used*, rather than something that is (re)created everyday by students and staff. While there is a small subversion of this dynamic in the TNB statement, the fact that this statement *is* so out of line with the rest of the university output (and that it is relatively difficult to find), only works to emphasise how both the rest of the EDI page and the video utilise LGBT+ presence in the service of showing the university as a socially desirable and legally, morally righteous 'brand' to be 'invested' in.

6.4.2 Goldsmiths - the intersection of subversion and conformity

Like the Sussex video, the Goldsmiths video too (Goldsmiths College, 2023), plays explicitly with its positioning in an in-between space. However, instead of being in-between authority and anti-authority, it positions itself in-between the familiar and the strange, as well as being in-between the large-scale and the local. This starts already with the tagline - “big ideas, cosy campus”. Throughout the video, this juxtaposition is emphasised both visually and in terms of content. Where the Sussex video essentially erases the educational aspect of the student experience to focus solely on Brighton as a city, the Goldsmiths video integrates the experiences of the area and its people with the experience of education at Goldsmiths, describing both in very similar terms. This self-representation of Goldsmiths as an in-between space is consistent with how we talked about Goldsmiths during my time as a student there: everybody’s work was jokingly described as ‘at the intersection of [x] and [y]’ (at the intersection of art and technology, at the intersection of academia and community activism, et cetera), and to describe oneself in such a multi-layered and uncategorisable way was considered ‘SFG’ - So Fucking Goldsmiths. Indeed, the self-aware naff-ness of describing anything as SFG was also SFG.

Unlike the Sussex video, the Goldsmiths video includes talking heads of current students explaining the perks of attending Goldsmiths. As the talking heads are direct-to-camera, the viewers are directly addressed by people whom we know by name and degree subject, and the shots position the viewer as at a level height and within conversational distance to the students, as if we know them already (Machin, 2016, p. 141). Over the course of a short video we get to know where most of them were raised, and how they feel about their degrees. The students are all filmed in different locations and do not interact with each other at any point.

The video is surrounded by a colourful digitally-designed frame, simultaneously providing a visual consistency between the different shots and talking heads, while also making it clear that this is not a naturalistic video. Particularly the use of non-primary colours in the frame (pink, orange and grey), present the image as complex and potentially contradictory, rather than carrying the connotations of certainty and simplicity that primary colours evoke (Machin, 2016, p.95). This sense of alienation and complexity is further established through the interspersion and split-screen of the talking heads with montages of other people, sprawling landscapes, classes, and performances, creating spatial incoherence. Although most people depicted in the montages seem unaware of the camera, there are two moments where the viewer is stared back at: one person is depicted pointing a camera at the viewer, and another person raises a cup to the viewer. This reversal in whether we are looking or being looked-at, creates another layer of ambiguity in the video (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p.73; Machin, 2016, p.48).

In contrast to the Sussex video, both the physical location of the campus and the teaching that goes on here is noted at length. Indeed, the integration of education into the new and the ‘strange’, is presented as adding to the quality of this education. Student Rowan, for instance, notes that doing an interdisciplinary course has allowed them to make friends across departments, and student Shanice notes that “you’re always meeting new people”. Similarly, teaching staff are presented as being in-between the academic world and the creative industries, and their “distinct specialism[s]” are presented as an asset to the courses.

While there is more of an emphasis on the spectacular in the Sussex video, the Goldsmiths video seems equally concerned with showing the attractiveness of *mundanity* in student life. This is particularly noticeable in how the different students talk about moving to/in London - for one student from a small town “where nothing changes”, the London campus represents a definite moving-away, going so far as to describe it as “it couldn’t be more different, which is

exactly what I wanted". On the other hand, for another student who has grown up in London, the interactions at Goldsmiths allow for a re-orientation towards their hometown. While it is not directly placed in an LGBT+ context, this questioning and re-visiting what home, family, and mundanity mean, does echo the kind of dynamic that my student participants found attractive in moving to university.

fig. 4 - Video screenshot of student Rowan

It is perhaps surprising, then, that out of the three videos this is the only one that does not make reference to gender or sexuality either through explicit naming, or through rainbow imagery. In form and content, the video poses the questioning of established norms as integral to its educational and social mission. Yet this is never explicitly applied to norms around gender and sexuality, or even marginalisation and societal engagement more broadly. Here we can think about the disjunction between appearance and effect as explored by Fairclough: although the form and content of the video appear to present the viewer with in-between-ness and criticality, this in-between-ness is at the same time inextricably linked to the imagery of consumption.

I am particularly intrigued by one student's use of the term 'diversity' to describe the variety of food places available around Deptford. This positions the Goldsmiths campus most explicitly in the traditional realm of the Third Place as a place of commerce. 'Diversity' here stands in for

diversity of consumption, and this is emphasised by the disembodied body parts and faces that are shown in the montages and split-screens. Similarly, student Sai notes that “you feel like you’re part of a community” because of the single-campus location that means that “there’s students everywhere”. These two instances are the only times that the words ‘community’ and ‘diversity’ are used in the video at all.

fig. 5 - Video screenshot of student Sai

Like in the Sussex video, diversity and community are very much presented as something integrated with both the social and physical landscape of the Goldsmiths campus and its surrounding area, rather than something that is created through action. This is in line with existing critiques of ‘community’ and ‘diversity’ as used in university promotional material, where they tend to be presented as transactionally provided *for* the student-consumer (Hartley and Morphew, 2008; Lewin-Jones, 2019). This stands in contrast to my participants’ experiences, where community is something that is embodied by people and practice. Furthermore, the format of the video and its emphasis on the singular voice, prevents any look into the actual workings of interaction and community-making.

Where Sussex seems to rejoice in the carnivalesque, the countercultural, and the spectacular, Goldsmiths presents itself as being at a more nuanced intersection of everything: strangeness and familiarity, education and industry, alienation and continuity, traditional notions of quality and disruption of these traditions. Nevertheless, here too consumption plays a large part of what seems to construct the student experience. This means that once again the 'sprinkling' of community is only there to add flavour to this 'complex' university image of Goldsmiths, but is not actually explored as an embodied and people'd practise. I have been using the language of 'sprinkling' and flavour very intentionally here (and even considered using the phrase 'spicing up'), to evoke the consumptive and digestive nature of diversity commodification, which bell hooks so aptly describes as 'eating the other' (hooks, 2015) - diversity not just as something to be used, but something to be used *up*. Again, the fact that 'diversity' is only verbally named in relation to diversity of food establishments, is not lost on me.

Goldsmiths is the university which arguably has the largest contrast between its student experience video and the EDI page, both in terms of form and in terms of content. Visually, the Goldsmiths EDI landing page is striking in its monotony. Especially in comparison to the vibrant and colourful student life video, what stands out about the page is not so much what is there, but what is *not* there: there are very few images aside from those pertaining to accreditation schemes, and a banner showing one of the university's buildings.There are no images, quotes or testimonials from students or staff.

The page uses muted greys and whites to establish its sense of professionalism and objectivity (Machin, 2016, p.88). The monochrome overlay for the banner makes the building stand out harshly against a relatively even background, ensuring that the photo looks almost iconographic. Where the video placed a lot of value on interaction and crossing of boundaries, locations, and disciplinary differences (among students, between students and staff, and

between the Goldsmiths community and the wider local community and industry), the EDI page seems to firmly embed itself into an image of procedure and policy. This is to the extent that there are no people present on the page at all, either visually or as named contacts. This makes it difficult to think of EDI as a process that involves (inter)action between human beings, rather than action for, by, and within a faceless institution.

Content-wise too, what is most notable about the page is what it does *not* say: there is very little there about support or community. The page is divided into four sections:

1. “We are passionate about advancing equality and celebrating diversity at Goldsmiths” which outlines a broad statement of intent.
2. “Monitoring our progress” which provides a series of links to past annual EDI reports
3. “Schemes and Charters” which shows the different equality charters that Goldsmiths is a part of.
4. “How Goldsmiths meets the Equality Act”, a drop-down menu that details Goldsmiths’ response to the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010.

Where the video made great efforts to present Goldsmiths students as inherently part of a very specifically-located community, the language used in the EDI pages is so generic that with a slight change in details, it could be used as a template for any other university.

The first paragraph does make reference to the history and image (both academic and social) of Goldsmiths, and uses the language of community and collaboration to do so, in saying that “Goldsmiths has a rich heritage of challenging inequality in all its forms and equality, inclusion and social justice are values which are incredibly important to Goldsmiths.” However, there are no details about what this rich heritage entails. The rest of the page consists solely of

policy-based language, and the language of obligation to the law. Similarly, although the statement of intent uses the language of integration and embeddedness and talks about doing this through collaboration, there are no examples given of how this is done, by whom specifically, or what issues this is in response to.

The website provides some external links to EDI documentation, like the university's EDI strategy, its action plan, and its annual reports. These provide timelines of what has been happening within the university around EDI decision-making, and they provide statistical information about the demographic make-up of students and staff. However, again the *experience* of the university is not included, which casts some doubt on the exact function of the documents. Naming something a 'report' implies that it is a descriptive document, which *reports on* what is happening within the university EDI-wise. Yet this report only lists objectives and subsequent actions taken. While this may *look* like a form of accountability, there is critical information that is not included on any of the linked documents: what issues caused the objectives to be noted in the first place? Were the actions successful in meeting the objectives? Without this information, the documents are presumed to be performatively successful: the action is presented as successful, simply through its inclusion in a report.

The last part of the EDI page provides references to the Equality Act, and participation in accreditation schemes, including Stonewall - again, without describing what this participation means in concrete, local terms. Instead of discussing what exactly it is that makes Goldsmiths a good place for LGBT+ employees, there is just a link to Stonewall's own website. This website only outlines what participation in the scheme means broadly. One of the paragraphs in the Equality Act section does mention that Goldsmiths wants to go beyond this legal duty and be recognised as a "leading Higher Education Institution in this area". This seems to acknowledge that legal and ethical obligations cannot simply be considered to be one and the same.

However, the rest of the section merely outlines what Goldsmiths is doing, *without* showing the effect of this in relation to other institutions, or the impact on the sector as a whole. Furthermore, the subsequent paragraph only links again to the EDI strategy, and then continues to outline legal duties, foregoing the opportunity to explain exactly *how* the institution goes beyond the legal duty, and returning to primarily policy and outcome-based language.

Altogether, Goldsmiths' EDI page provides a very different impression of the university to the student experience video - one that is not diverse, colourful, or concerned with the everyday particularities of the people within the institution, but rather a toned-down and procedural institution. Again, it is unsurprising that pages like these are not used to critically detail the shortcomings of the university. As previously mentioned, my participants were aware of (and cynical about) the regular disjunction between communication *for* universities' LGBT+ communities and communication *about* LGBT+ communities. Nevertheless, it does point to an intrinsic contradiction between whom these pages purport to serve, and the actual function that they provide *for* the university.

6.4.3 King's College - tradition and temporality

The student experience videos for King's College London (KCL) take the form of 'campus tours', corresponding to each of the main KCL campuses (King's College London, 2023a). They are by far the longest videos of the three universities, regardless of whether they are interpreted as several short videos or one long video. They are divided into four parts: three segments of roughly four minutes each (to cover the Guy's, Denmark Hill, and Waterloo campuses) and one segment of seven minutes (to cover Strand campus), adding up to over nineteen minutes in total. In each of the segments, a different student takes the viewer round their respective campus, speaking directly to camera about the different facilities that they surround themselves with.

Although there are some montages within the videos that are narrated via voiceover, the movement from one space to another tends to be depicted by uninterrupted (if sped-up) footage of the student-presenter walking from one location to another. This gives the video a sense of spatial coherence, as well as placing the camera (and by extension the viewer) in the position of someone who follows the student-presenter through the space. This creates a sense of familiarity between viewer and presenter (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.116). Although the student-presenters are talking about the space they are located in, they never explicitly interact with it. Similarly, the people in the background are just that - the background. They do not acknowledge the student-presenters, nor interact with them.

The city itself also forms part of the backdrop for the KCL student experience. Particularly in the videos for the central London campuses (Strand, Guy's and Waterloo), the proximity to iconic landmarks is emphasised both verbally and visually, and the city itself forms a visual constant through shots of grey concrete, steel, and plateglass buildings, in all their rational angularity (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.55). In contrast to the Sussex and Goldsmiths videos, the city surrounding the KCL campus is portrayed as decidedly un-people'd. There are shots of masses of passers-by, but we do not focus on individuals outside the KCL campuses, or even small groups of people outside the campus.

fig. 6 - Video screenshot of the London skyline as seen from the KCL campus

At the same time, KCL's reputation in terms of heritage is spectacularised throughout the tours. Famous alumni are shown visually and explicitly named by the student-presenters (the Robin Murray lecture theatre is named after a KCL psychiatrist who recently received a knighthood!), and there is a strong emphasis on British historical, social and political prestige (Bush House used to be the BBC headquarters! KCL was involved in anti-doping testing during the 2012 Olympics!), the link between the campus buildings and the monarchy (Somerset House is a former palace!), as well as ecclesiastical presence within the campus.

All this focus on KCL as an institution with a long, prestigious, valued history, leaves very little space for the new or the strange. Indeed, in contrast to the Sussex video where statues are playfully (though not permanently) mocked through woolly hats, and grey walls are painted over with graffiti and street art, in the KCL video the presence of neoclassical-style statues and immaculately plain City buildings are presented completely straightforwardly.

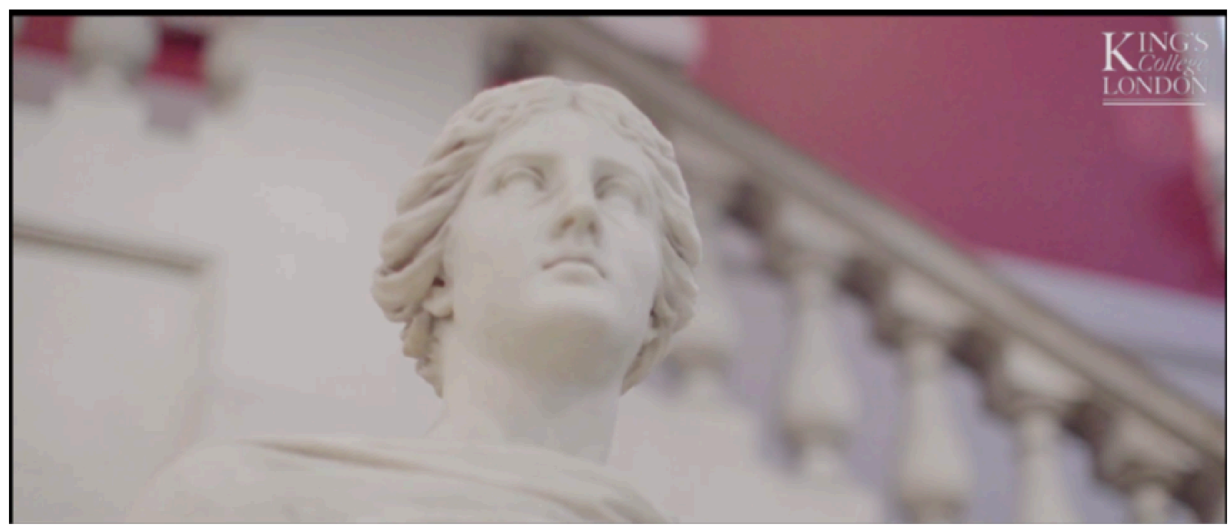

fig. 7 - Video screenshot of a neoclassical statue

The only possibility of LGBT+ students finding their discursive place in this grand history, seems to be through the Students' Union (SU). In the Strand campus video, the LGBT+ society is verbally mentioned as one of over three hundred societies that the SU oversees, as the video shows one of the KCLSU desks adorned with rainbow flags. The societies are framed as being there to 'suit every interest' and the LGBT+ society is named in the same breath as hobby-based societies (the Baking Society) and utilitarian societies (Women in Leadership Society). Similar to the previous two videos, it is also important to note that these brief mentions occur within the context of broader discourses around consumption - the availability of different kinds of food, bars[24], cultural endeavours, gyms, activities, and cafés is noted in all the different campus videos.

Although this is the only video of the three that mentions the SU at all, there seems to be no place to discuss its potential as a 'union' in the traditional sense of the word. The possibility of

[24] It should be noted that the Strand campus video betrays that these videos are not up-to-date. The student-presenter makes reference to the Philosophy Bar, which shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic. Towards the end of this section I will briefly discuss the issue of temporality in digital promotional material, and the difficulties of working with artefacts that may age 'invisibly'.

the SU as a *political* body advocating on behalf of its members, is not addressed within the video. Neither is there any mention of the fact that the SU is student-led rather than university-led, or even the idea that KCLSU is a separate entity to the university itself. Instead, there is just the verbal and visual confirmation of KCLSU as a space to consume the 'student experience'. Someone unfamiliar with UK SU structures, might be forgiven for thinking that KCLSU is just another term for 'student services'.

This elision between university and student organising translates to the video's mentions of LGBT+ communities too. Out of the three videos, KCL is the most conservative in both form and content, while also being the only one to name its LGBT+ society, or explicitly allude to an LGBT+ presence in speech. Perhaps the video is able to name its LGBT+ presence *because* of its conservatism: the society's potential as a space for dissenting, unexpected, or anti-authoritarian voices, is tamed by it being visually and narratively placed in the context of heritage, lineage, and consumption. Again, (LGBT+) community is something that a KCL student will be *provided* with, rather than actively constitute.

KCL's EDI webpage is an interesting case, because it has *two* EDI landing pages: an initial one on the main website, and another as a subsection of the Professional Services page of the website. Both the fact that there are two landing pages at all, and the fact that they contain very different types of content, says a lot about how these pages function within an institutional context. I will firstly discuss the main EDI statement, before going into the Professional Services one.

KCL's main EDI statement is by far the briefest of the three universities, with only three paragraphs (four if the final sentence is counted as a paragraph by itself), no images aside from a banner showing groups of students sitting at outdoors tables, and no links to reports or

policies. The page uses muted tones of grey and navy, and on first glance looks quite similar to the Goldsmiths page. However, KCL's use of this colour scheme is less jarring compared to that of Goldsmiths, as the navy/grey combination was one of the primary palettes used in the KCL video as well. There are links in the sidebar, but these are not integrated with the rest of the text. Both the "Policies" and the "Guidelines and resources" tab redirect to the main HR page of the KCL website, and the "Report + Support" link redirects to a page to report misconduct more broadly.

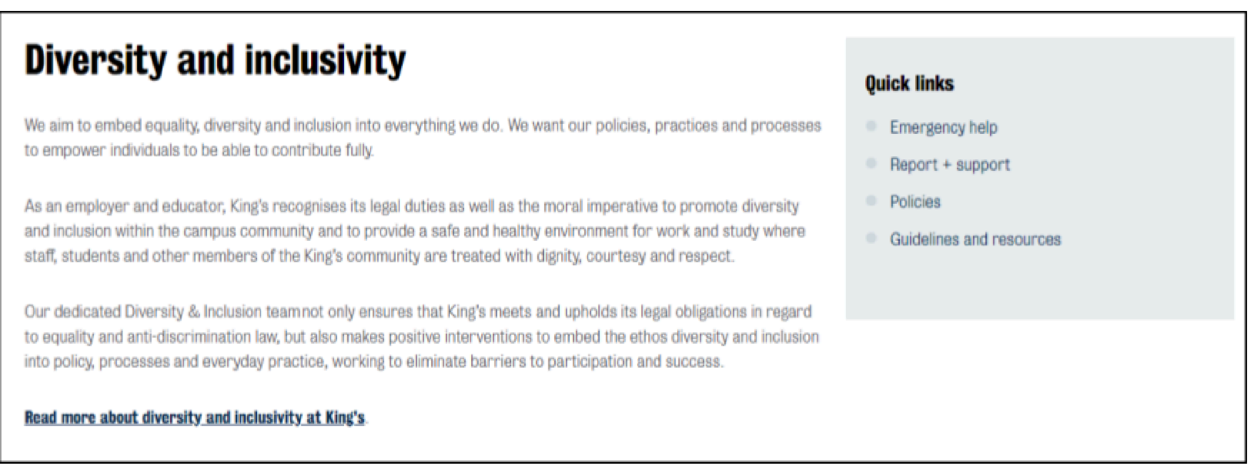

fig. 8 - Screenshot of the KCL EDI page

The statement (King's College London, 2023b) uses neoliberal language, noting its vision of EDI as "empower[ing] individuals to be able to contribute fully". Although what it is that people would be contributing to, remains a mystery, as well as what the link is between these individuals and the university. Although, like the Goldsmiths statement, it explicitly states that it sees EDI as *both* a legal and moral obligation, no examples are given of how this is done. Similarly, while we are *told* that positive interventions are made by the EDI team, it is not made clear what these positive interventions are, or what issues within the university they are responding to.

Up until March 2023, the last sentence of the page was "Read more about diversity and inclusivity at King's", which, while seemingly a prompt, did not actually contain a link that would *allow* a website visitor to 'read more'. This was the case since at least December 2022, which was the first time I visited the EDI landing page. However, as of March 2023, this has been amended to include a link to the Professional Services EDI page. This page is far more extensive in content, and far more personal in tone. It is divided into six sections ('Services', 'About', 'Why Equality, Diversity & Inclusion matter', 'The EDI Operating Model', 'Governance', and 'Contact Us'). While these sections are all rich with data, for reasons of brevity I will focus on the 'Contact Us' section, as this is the most relevant to the discussion of gender and sexuality.

The 'Contact Us' section profiles the different EDI practitioners within KCL, introducing them with their name, role, a short bio, contact details, and in some cases the person's pronouns, a profile picture, their LinkedIn details, and a link that allows people to contact them directly on Microsoft Teams. Out of the eleven bios, eight are written in the first person, and four of these start with a direct address to the reader in the form of a 'hello'. This is decidedly more personal than the main EDI page, and shows the real people behind the institution in a way that neither the main EDI page, nor the Sussex and Goldsmiths pages do.

Two of the bios contain references to the practitioners' own identification as either 'LGBTQ+' or as a 'queer woman', while another person notes that he previously worked for Pride in London. The bios give more insight into the people behind the EDI work, and they also seem to imply that these personal identifications and histories contribute to a better understanding of EDI work. This emphasis on lived experience is in stark contrast to the impersonal and policy-based language displayed on the main page, and is much more in line with what my participants describe as necessary to creating interpersonal connections.

As with the student experience video, the EDI pages allow KCL to present itself *both* as more conservative (in aesthetic and content) *and* as more explicitly and unambiguously supportive of LGBT+ communities. The duality of the two KCL webpages also points attention to the issue of authorship and temporality in matters of institutional image - the production process of a website is often obscured for those who visit it, and changes can be made to a website without any publicly available record of how, why and when these changes are made[25]. A visitor to the website after March 2023 might be pleasantly surprised at the wealth of information available, as well as the person-focused language in which this information is displayed, while being completely unaware of how recent an addition to the website this is.

This temporal disconnect is particularly important in the context of ‘diversity’ being taken up and discarded at the whim of what promotional discourses demand: the form of promotional material might present itself as naturally, eternally welcoming of LGBT+ staff and students, but this presentation may just as easily be reversed once the institution is called upon to make its implied commitments more defined, and thereby less palatable to a wide audience.

6.5 Conclusion - different genres, same effect

In February 2021, I started seeing advertising for MA study at the University of Sussex on my Facebook page. At first, I did not recognise it as advertising, despite the fact that I do not follow the university’s Facebook page, and the declaration that this post had been paid for by the university. The reason for my initial misrecognition was that the picture accompanying the post

[25] In fact, even over the course of writing this chapter, aspects of the EDI pages were changed in ways that would not have left an obvious trace to anyone who is not explicitly looking for these traces. I relied on the Internet Archive (Internet Archive, 2024) to return to the versions of pages which I first encountered. However, this is of course a highly unusual way of reading webpages, and not one that prospective students are likely to engage in.

depicted a group of people I had volunteered and organised with for several years, and I thought someone had just uploaded a photo of an LGBT+ student society event from several years prior.

When I went to the university page, it turned out that there were several posts advertising university places, but I had only been shown the one with rainbow gear. I have no insight into the algorithmic workings of Facebook on the level of code. However, it is possible to see the 'interest categories' that Facebook has assigned individual users. These are algorithmically detected categorisations that affect what kind of advertising one sees. Apparently, Facebook had detected/decided[26] that I am interested in the topics 'homosexuality', 'education', 'student', and 'rainbow flag (LGBT movement)' among others. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that it had been a strategic move on the side of the university to use the LGBT+ student society (even if they were not explicitly named as such in the post) to advertise unrelated courses to LGBT+ people specifically.

[26] I use 'detected/decided' here, because of course algorithmic advertising is always somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy: if Facebooks shows me more advertising for rainbow flags, then I will be more likely to interact with advertising for rainbow flags, which may then reaffirm me as someone who is particularly interested in rainbow flags.

fig. 9 - MA advert

I brought this up to another former member (who remains a good friend of mine to this day) who had been present when the picture was taken. In this conversation, another part of the story emerged: The LGBT+ society had been explicitly approached to have photos taken in rainbow gowns, to be used in the promotional efforts by the university. The society committee was happy to take part in this. After the photoshoot the committee met with the university's Vice-Chancellor at the time, under the impression that they were there to discuss how the university could better accommodate LGBT+ students on campus. However, the meeting was not very fruitful, and suggestions by the society committee for action going forward (including for instance addressing the slow movement around getting more gender-neutral toilets on campus) were brushed aside in favour of an explanation about what the university was already doing, like its continued presence at Brighton Pride. No concrete decisions or actions resulted from the meeting.

Unsurprisingly, this discussion is not visible in the Facebook advertisement, nor are similar discussions indexed in any of the videos or EDI statements discussed in this chapter, save for maybe the (quite difficult to find) TNB statement by the University of Sussex. Given that many of my participants mentioned having negative, frustrating, or unproductive conversations with line managers or managerial staff, it is unlikely that these conversations simply do not happen. Rather, they are not made visible.

This gap between institutional visibility and institutional power is exactly the dynamic that led me to write this chapter, as is the gap between how LGBT+ communities are depicted versus how these communities are experienced. It should be noted that I am not claiming that it should be surprising for student experience videos or EDI statements not to dwell on the LGBT+ presence within their university into great depth, or in the language of community rather than the language of leisure or procedure. In many ways the videos and statements are exemplary of the genres they work in, mixing and matching the descriptive and (non-)performative functions of LGBT+ indexes, depending on what makes the university appear in the best light. This 'best light' only includes LGBT+ people when they are in agreement with the university, whereas those who occupy a more complex position in relation to the university's actions (let alone those who are in opposition altogether) are not that easily brandable. The message is clear: LGBT+ students and staff should join the institution, but should not form a threat to it.

Indeed, the absurdity of looking for a community of strangers in what is essentially marketing material and legal documents is as absurd as hoping for a US president that has lived the lives of the people they allegedly represent. However, this is exactly my point: what I hope this chapter has done, is point out the conventions *of* these genres, how they (re)present particular aspects of university culture as inevitable or taken-for-granted, and how these conventions almost inevitably create LGBT+ communities as either unmentioned or decorative, a static good

to be ‘acquired’ through consumption rather than something more fluid which is continually (re)created through the persistent investment of time and effort by those who constitute it.

Returning to the question I posed in the introduction: should the question be asked if we know the answer? I think it should. Of course, the student experience videos were never going to show the minutiae of a committee meeting. Of course the EDI pages were never going to talk about the transphobia that students and staff may run into on campus. But what they *have* shown are the particular institutional ways in which these discourses construct this incompatibility within the genres and contexts in which they are produced.

Chapter 7 - The value of LGBT+ community: rethinking care, rethinking ‘success’

7.1 Introduction

“Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people.” (Freire, 1996, p. 81)

One major reason for wanting to research LGBT+ volunteering communities was the realisation that these communities constituted a large part of my social and emotional development, even after I had left them. Many of my closest friends were made in these spaces, yet at the same time whenever our conversations turn to reminiscing about our time in student networks, the tone shifts to a decidedly critical one: on one hand, we can while away hours detailing all the ways in which our communities were sites of conflict, hurt, and annoyance. Sometimes this was a result of the stratifying and occasionally explicitly bigoted dynamics that occurred in these spaces (as discussed in chapter 5), sometimes we felt frustrated at the lack of institutional support and recognition we received (as discussed in chapter 6). However, sometimes it was also simply a question of there being too many people with very strong ideas about how to organise effectively, without necessarily having developed the interpersonal or professional skills to synthesise these different views into a workable practice. On the other hand, when I reminisce about volunteering with my friends, all of us credit LGBT+ volunteering spaces with providing opportunities to learn more about ourselves and others, even if this learning came as a result of profoundly stressful or even traumatic experiences. What does it mean to have this ambivalent attachment to spaces that are both so rewarding and so incredibly frustrating? What

is it about university-based LGBT+ communities that is so valuable, that volunteers are often willing to endure so many negative experiences?

Far from *solely* being confusing or contradictory, relational ambivalence can give us critical distance to examine the desire for continuing attachment, as well as the problems that can arise from this desire (Huang, 2023). This same emotional contradiction came up in my participants' narratives, with some participants explicitly commenting on their relational ambivalence to their communities, both feeling very passionate towards it and very aware of the tensions within it. When trying to find literature on 'ambivalence' specifically from an LGBT+ perspective, this word seemed to mainly be applied to the complex relationship between chosen kinship and biolegal kinship. In particular, it was applied to the desire for retaining ties to the racialised/immigrant biolegal family as an LGBT+ subject in the diaspora, even if this tie might in many ways be emotionally taxing or precarious to maintain (Weston, 1997; Pidduck, 2009; Huang, 2023).

Alternatively, there was a wealth of research on ambivalent attachment *to* LGBT+ communities, in the sense that not everyone who identified with an LGBT+ identity, also felt part of a community (Holt, 2011; Formby, 2017). Vice versa, there are many critiques of how LGBT+ communities can create ambivalent 'in-group' status for particular sub-groups that should ostensibly be covered by the term 'LGBT+'. For example, racialised LGBT+ people (Puar, 2007), trans people (Duggan, 2003; Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020), disabled LGBT+ people (Toft, Franklin and Langley, 2020), or those LGBT+ people most marginalised within capitalist structures altogether (Joseph, 2002), may enjoy a very precarious, conditional or unstable status *as* LGBT+ community members.

These critiques of ambivalent attachment to the community were highly relevant to my participants, as discussed in the previous chapters: the communities my participants were part

of did often reinforce normative hierarchies, participants did compare their communities to the biolegal family in complex ways, participants did often feel ambivalent about their attachment to 'the' community. However, only considering the ambivalence of attachment *to* community, does a disservice to the variety of ambivalent emotions that circulate *within* those communities. As I was coding the interviews and focus groups, I became particularly interested in the codes 'satisfaction' and 'want people to care'. Whereas many of the other emotion-codes ('scared', 'isolated', 'joy', 'feeling safe' etc.) mostly indicated emotional similarities between different communities, the ways that satisfaction with and care for one's work were narrated, varied quite distinctly between participants. Moreover, many of these narratives also explicitly named and contradicted normative institutional expectations around care and success.

Thus far, my focus has been on LGBT+ communities as spaces that are dynamically responsive to (and embedded in) particular discourses around LGBT+ life, discourses which are changeable and context-dependent. I have discussed how aims, representations, and interpretations of LGBT+ communities have been ambiguously and inconsistently constructed. However, in previous chapters I have treated this ambiguity and inconsistency in mainly descriptive terms, painting a picture of what is going on in university LGBT+ communities, and explaining why things are the way they are. In this chapter, I want to approach ambiguity and inconsistency in a more transformative way: by seeing LGBT+ communities as sites of epistemological interest, sites where new ideas of what constitutes communal success are created, enacted, communicated and transferred through informal, critical pedagogies (Freire, 1996; Batsleer, 2008). I am therefore considering what the value of LGBT+ communities is to my participants, and how LGBT+ communities work as sites of ambivalent emotional attachments, which can allow us to think differently about how we relate to care and success as concepts. Furthermore, I will investigate how the practices in these spaces can be used to create counter-hegemonic value systems within neoliberalised Higher Education institutions,

even as LGBT+ volunteers are delimited in their actions through their position within these institutions.

7.1.1 Cruel optimism and undoing

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant makes the case for *all* attachments as optimistic ones: by attaching ourselves to anything at all, we imbue the object or the relation with a series of promises that we would like to see fulfilled (Berlant, 2011). However, Berlant argues, it is not uncommon for people to become attached to things that are actually detrimental to their ability to thrive. In fact, these detrimental qualities may be obvious to the person even as they continue to desire them. This desire for (self-)destructive attachments has paradoxical consequences: in attempting to move the self towards the object of desire, it is this self which becomes more and more damaged.

The LGBT+ volunteer's attachment to the academic institution, as discussed in previous chapters, can be explained as cruelly optimistic, with volunteers doing more and more work to improve a university that uses them up. In this chapter I would like to focus on the concept of cruel optimism as it circulates *within* LGBT+ communities, by putting the term in dialogue with the following excerpt by Judith Butler, in their book *Precarious Life*:

> "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. This seems so clearly the case with grief, but it can be so only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel." (Butler, 2004, p.27)

Butler here writes about grief and connection as two sides of the same ego death coin, with both facilitating the other. *Precarious Life* is specifically about how mourning can create normative distinctions between who is 'in' community and who is 'outside' community, including the designation of LGBT+ lives as ungrievable: they were never deemed 'proper' lives to begin with, so their loss cannot and should not be mourned. The extent to which we mourn (or can imagine mourning) the loss of certain lives can indicate the extent to which effort is put into preserving these lives.

However, these dynamics of connection, mourning, and desire, are of course just as present *within* LGBT+ communities as they are between LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ communities. The promise we encounter when entering an LGBT+ community can be *to* be undone, or to cause someone else to be undone. The promise of being undone can be exciting - a way to be taken out of one's own body, one's own perspective as one knows it, the kind of sensation one might otherwise chase through drugs, alcohol, sex, or love. The ability to not feel like a singular boundaried entity, but instead sinking into the world like one would sink into a comfy chair, becoming one with one's surroundings. To become undone in/as the face of the Other, to be a community of strangers.

Of course there can be a particularly strong desire to experience this sinking for those who have not traditionally had the opportunity to do so. In this chapter I will consider what it means to retain an attachment to an organising space that is often unsustainable and unrewarding. I will consider why people stay in these spaces, why it might be conceptually interesting but also *necessary* to continue organising in circumstances that are unpleasurable to the individual, if this works to maintain the *community*. I will examine why people stay, even when these are circumstances that do not fulfil the promise of becoming undone, circumstances that create even clearer boundaries between self and Other. At the same time, I will consider how breaking

an attachment and *not* continuing, *not* staying can equally be a necessary step in the organising process.

7.1.2 An excess of care[27]

In this chapter I will argue that the care for LGBT+ communities is not necessarily a measured or carefully-paced one. Indeed, traditional views on LGBT+ identity often equate it with stunted or accelerated attachment (Halberstam, 2011). We can think here of the stereotypical U-haul lesbian or the promiscuous gay man, the idea of too much too fast as a form of self-destruction through immediate attachment to the other. This is complemented by traditional stereotypes of LGBT+ communities as unable to direct care in the right way, towards the 'right' (i.e. heterosexual, reproductive) object of affection. For instance we may consider the role that pets have played as primary receivers of LGBT+ care instead of the child or the spouse (McKeithen, 2017). We can think of sexuality directed at the fetish object instead of a person. LGBT+ care has been constructed as a failure of both pace and procedure.

We can also think about the attachment of trans people to their bodies as pathologised as intrinsically problematic. Trans people, and trans women specifically, have historically been constructed as either 'pathetic' in their inability to reconcile the desired body with the actual body, or 'deceptive' when they *are* able to reconcile the two (Serano, 2007). The amount of parentheses and quotation marks in the past two paragraphs alone may give a visual indicator of how doubly-bound LGBT+ identities are: both too little and too much, too quick and too slow,

[27] When I talk about 'care' here, I mean this in the sense of feeling a non-formalised attachment to something. I use 'care' to mean attachment in feeling only, rather than in any legal, medical or professional sense. This seems to be a relatively under-used definition of 'care', compared to the large bodies of literature available in the fields of LGBT+ mental health care (e.g. Meyer, 2003; Morris, 2018; Canvin, Twist and Solomons, 2023), elder care (e.g. Shiu, Muraco and Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016; Lottmann and King, 2022; Willis *et al.*, 2023), and palliative care (e.g. Harding, Epiphaniou and Chidgey-Clark, 2012; Almack, Smith and Moss, 2015).

too passive and too active all at the same time, whatever the cisheteronormative standards are, they are always already mutually constitutive with LGBT+ people's failure to meet them.

When failure has been considered from an LGBT+ perspective, a well-trodden path has been forged to the concept of camp - the failure to care for the right thing, to care in the right way, to prioritise care in the right way. In Susan Sontag's seminal *Notes on Camp*, this failure leads to an attachment to irony, aesthetics, artifice (Sontag, 1964/2018). Camp is a disavowal of the earnest, in favour of the elevation of a layering of artifice for artifice's sake, a signifier without a signified - an aesthetic equivalent to Butler's description of gender as the 'copy without an original'. However, where the Butlerian gendered subject becomes naturalised as always-already original, camp knows itself to be always-already copy. I want to consider one of the most-quoted passages of Sontag's *Notes:* "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role."

However, I would like to propose a mirror image to the excessive artifice of camp, while remaining in the realm of queer-as-abundance and queer-as-malfunctioned-caring: I would argue that my participants' stories show an attachment to a concept of *earnestness* in care. This earnestness exactly rejects the co-option of this care for 'artificial' purposes - if camp is a constant putting-in-quotation-marks, then the care that my participants spoke about, may instead be an attempt to remove these quotation marks, removing the layers of signification and connotation. Crucially, where this earnestness differs from naturalisation, is the self-awareness that this journey is likely to be futile - care is here not a means towards an impactful, successful end, a way of getting towards a 'pure' signified behind the signifier. Instead, care here is *trying for the sake of trying*.

This is an attachment to earnestness which is often persistent but also potentially unwarranted in its optimism of producing a result of equivalent momentum: the amount of care volunteers put in, might not be what they get in return. In their discussion of this cruelly optimistic care, my participants use an uprooted view of what constitutes success and 'appropriate' levels of care. I argue that this uprooted view can be useful in re-thinking how care could be constituted within Higher Education.

I do not intend to imply that this sense of excessive care and attachment has been wholly unexplored. In fact, popular culture seems to thrive on this queer compulsion to care. Much queer art that has explored this notion, has been elevated to seminal status: the longing for a better world that seems never to arrive in the poem *I want a dyke* (see chapter 6). Prior Walter's 'addiction to life' despite life seemingly not wanting *him*, in *Angels in America* (Kushner, 2017). The home that Stephen Gordon makes for herself in *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall and Saxey, 2014), k.d. lang's *Constant Craving* (*Constant Craving*, 1992). In *A Little Life* (Yanagihara, 2016) it is Jude and Willem's relationship and their tight-knit friendship group, which endures hardship after hardship until holding onto it seems more cruel than letting go. In a more recent example, the careful negotiation of body, loss, and trauma in *Our Wives Under the Sea* (Armfield, 2023), where even as readers we are not really sure what it is that is being looked after, just that the looking-after is necessary, almost pathological. *The Song of Achilles* (Miller, 2021), where the hero is both diegetically and extra-diegetically always doomed from the start if he chooses to enact his care in the 'wrong' way. Despite being aware of the consequences, he cares anyway.

Yet these artistic explorations of near-compulsive attachment to care do not always translate to the Social Sciences, where we are often trained to write in the language of solutions,

explanations, or impact, as opposed to exploring the emotions present[28]. Incidentally, the aforementioned pieces are among my favourite pieces of writing, and ones that I return to again and again. I say 'incidentally', but of course it is highly likely that I enjoy these pieces *because* I am interested in this exploration of care in myself and my surroundings. We often end up embodying the connections between various aspects of our lives, and that which draws me to one interest may also draw me to another (Ahmed, 2019). Similarly, if LGBT+ communities are often (derogatorily) positioned as excessively caring anyway, this might mean that many LGBT+ narratives are concerned with exploring this excess. This might mean reclaiming and finding joy in it, but also examining when and how this excess may become unhealthy.

This chapter looks at the moments where participants made/encountered distinctions between normative and non-normative expressions of care, and considers the implications of these distinctions with regards to LGBT+ volunteering values and practices. Firstly, I will discuss the circulation of care within LGBT+ communities: how does the responsibility to care become attached to some people more than others, how does care become politicised, and how can care be a vehicle for the expression of authority? Then, I will discuss the ways in which participants took situations that may traditionally be considered signs of failure, and renarrativised this to look at how these situations were not just beneficial, but sometimes foundationally necessary in constituting LGBT+ communities.

[28] An example of the dangers of rushing to impact without taking the time to understand context, can be found in Slater, 2023. Here, the author discusses being given the institutional advice to share their research on bathroom and trans inclusivity in spaces that were ideologically opposed to this research being done in the first place. While this may have indeed increased circulation of the findings, it also would have also put the author at significant risk of harassment.

7.2 Care [imperative]

"I think just getting other people to be enthusiastic? And especially the committee, it was very difficult to really light a fire of 'this is a really good thing we're doing, like care' [laugh] we're all busy, we've all got studies to do but like, this is also important?"

-Alexa

The above quote was Alexa describing her friction with other volunteers when asked about whether she experienced any particular hurdles. It was incredibly evocative of the emotional and professional dynamics involved with LGBT+ volunteering which drew me to this research in the first place. The simple use of 'care' as an imperative feels like it encompasses both an excitement for the potential that LGBT+ communities can have, while also conveying a frustration when this potential is not met. As Alexa already notes, by virtue of being *university* LGBT+ communities, volunteers had limited time to dedicate to these communities. Neither were these communities people's primary attachment to the university, as volunteers need to be students or staff before they can volunteer.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, the contextually contingent voluntary attachment can be beneficial: it means that community participants have a level of choice and agency in how they interact with their communities, with whom, and to what extent. However, this voluntary attachment also comes with its own problems. In this section, I will discuss how participants narrated the inability to mandate/ensure emotional investment for their LGBT+ communities from other community members. Furthermore, I will explore how they navigated frustrations when others within the community did not seem to care about this community *enough*.

Indeed, frustrations with a lack of care for the community was one of the main emotions I personally associated with volunteering, and one of the most interesting dualities about my time spent within volunteering spaces: it can be incredibly refreshing and rewarding to spend a lot of time working on something that you care very deeply about, but equally it can be incredibly frustrating or even humiliating to feel like this care is not reflected back. It can, in fact, be particularly *because* (rather than *in spite of*) our care that we get more badly hurt - “if we use something more because it has our affection, loving more can mean lasting less” (Ahmed, 2019, p.39). If interaction, even loving interaction, is understood as necessarily containing friction, then this friction will leave its traces. If we put all of ourselves to use for a project because we care about it so much, we can use ourselves up.

7.2.1 Care as unenforceable

One of the reasons that I used the (emotionally evocative) word ‘humiliating’ in the previous paragraph, is because of the particular vulnerability that comes with having one’s efforts evaluated in a communal context. A rejection of one’s work can often feel like a refusal to care about the person doing this work - a rejection of the worker as a friend, as a co-organiser, as a fellow community member. There are few things more heartbreaking than having to ask (or worse, *demand*) that someone cares about you. This may particularly express itself in voluntary work, especially when this voluntary work is not institutionally valued: when people are not financially remunerated for their participation, or when their participation does not necessarily gain them institutional or interpersonal power, the currency that is left tends to be *care* (McRobbie, 2015).

The impossibility of enforcing ‘genuine’, un-incentivised care, was the subject of a particularly interesting conversation between Graham and Hui Ting, in the second focus group. Graham said that he could find himself annoyed at people in his communities which he perceived as not

caring for the broader cause, arguing that while he cannot *demand* support, it would nevertheless be good if people cared because it is directly in their interests. He further added to this that “you can put a lot of effort and time into things and really just showing up, just telling someone, just listening would be nice [sigh].” In this last sentence, it seems to be not just the lack of engagement from other LGBT+ people that is frustrating, but specifically the relatively low infringement upon their time and effort it would be *to* do an action that would meaningfully contribute to their LGBT+ community. This is signalled by the fact that Graham uses the word ‘just’ three times, to construct particular actions as a minimal infraction on one’s time, in contrast to ‘[putting] a lot of effort and time into things’.

Graham’s discussion of the frustration he felt towards his community, was followed by a similar assertion from Hui Ting:

> “There’s frustration that you need to do this in the first place? That you need to volunteer, that you need people to show up and do these things [...] There is a need for things to get done? It’s frustrating and the fact that things are so far behind where they should be, and then it’s just also frustrations of like when you are trying to make things happen and people are not as supportive of it.”
>
> -Hui Ting, focus group 2

Both Graham and Hui Ting make a point of emphasising the particular frustration that comes with experiencing apathy from other LGBT+ people, when it is seemingly *for them* that these spaces are constructed in the first place. However, where they differ and complement each other very well, is in how they narrate the effort involved in engaging with university LGBT+ communities. Where Graham emphasises the frustration with how easily work *could* be done to help the LGBT+ society, Hui Ting emphasises frustration with the fact that any of this effort is placed on the shoulders of LGBT+ people to begin with. Both in Graham and Hui Ting’s

conversation and in the quote from Alexa that started this section, there also seems to be a particular frustration with the concept of care as unenforceable: it is frustrating that those who *could* care about LGBT+ issues (be those fellow LGBT+ people or non-LGBT+ people), do not do this.

Yet, despite care being unenforceable, at the same time there was a sense that care needed to be provided, and that there was not really an option *not* to provide it. In chapter 4, I discussed how participants found it important to have ‘something’, especially if the alternative was to have nothing. If a retraction of care means to leave people with this ‘nothing’, caring can start feeling compulsory - Hui Ting identifies a ‘need’ to get things done, whether one *wants* to do these things or not. We can think here of the question that Berlant poses: “who can bear to lose the world [and] what happens when the loss of what’s not working is more unbearable than the having of it” (Berlant, 2011, p. 27). The hope that LGBT+ communities can provide a new way of approaching the world is certainly an optimistic one, and the prospect of losing this hope might seem like it is ‘unbearable’, in that it would leave community members nowhere to go. However, the existence of these communities might be contingent upon a volunteering dynamic that is simply not working.

This is one way in which continuing investment in LGBT+ communities might be seen as a form of excessive care, when considered in a neoliberal cost/benefit dichotomy: the care put into the community is not ever guaranteed to be returned. The continuous pouring-in of care, might itself come to solidify harmful distinctions between those who can afford *not* to care, and those who feel like they *must* care. The attachment to an *ideal* of a community of strangers, is not the same as attachment to the individual people making up this community. The real people might be disappointing or outright obstructive to the continued existence of this community.

7.2.2 Care as personal (which is political)

> "Everyone loves a bar crawl but then when it comes to organising to help different groups and stuff like that, while there is still enthusiasm, it's not as much."
>
> -Scout

This inability to get others to care seemed to be an ongoing frustration, specifically when participants described internal discussions about the nature or intent of their university communities. This tended to be a discussion between whether the community is a social group with a focus on internal cohesion and sociality, or a politicised interest group with a focus on advocating for their members. This discussion of group identity often went hand-in-hand with a discussion about the division of care between the 'lighter' socialising events versus the more serious campaigning, or procedural meetings. This makes sense when communities are expected to function like a Third Place, as explored in chapter 4: when engagement with the community starts feeling like work, when it stops being something one can take up at will, the community will stop containing the benefits of a Third Place.

A paradox of LGBT+ volunteering then seems to be that there is no way to enforce an affective investment in that which makes the university LGBT+ community possible, as this would undermine one of its main points of attraction: while it needs to be there, the conditions which make it possible cannot be guaranteed. Consequently, participants in some of the newer networks argued that these 'lighter' elements of community were actually the parts that needed to be the primary focus of community work, as it is the sense of cohesion that forms the community, more so than the 'required' work. For instance, Crispin saw the need for community work occasionally being "light and happy" as fundamental to the existence of a network at all. While he acknowledged the need for more political or procedural work (e.g. organising and

chairing meetings, drafting agendas), he added that this work alone does not create a community, saying that “we don’t have to put the world right, but actually let’s just be there to support each other”.

This balancing of the social and the procedural was a particular concern for Evie, whose network had only come into existence a couple of weeks before the first COVID-19 lockdown. As discussed in chapter 5, the network had very few opportunities to engage in non-purposeful social interaction for the first year of its existence. Evie noted as well that this was complicated further by the fact that many of the events were jointly run between the staff and student networks, which meant a negotiation of boundaries and participation: many staff members were happy to be out to other staff but did not want to come out to their students. This convergence of sociality and responsibility made it difficult for the members within the network to interact with each other as anything other than colleagues, as well as making it difficult to find a communal identity.

In characterising the social activities as a way to facilitate/offset the more structural or policy-based activities, Evie and Crispin implicitly treat these ways of interaction as essentially separate realms. On the other hand, Johanna had a particular view of the social versus the procedural that synthesised the two. While there were initial tensions around whether the group was more socially or politically focused, Johanna said that it was necessary to challenge the assumption that these are two separate spheres of organising (she noted that “I know it’s a bit trite to say ‘the personal is political’, but it just is, you know!”). By creating a space that centres the wellbeing of LGBT+ people, she argued, she was able to connect people who might need support from each other, or might find solace in knowing that they are not the only people who are struggling with a cis straight norm. The attention to sociality was therefore not in competition with the attention to politics and responsibility, the two realms actually extend each other: being

social is a possibility to show that spaces in which these norms are questioned *are possible and there are people who care for them*. They are a small instantiation of a utopian vision of interpersonal relations (Muñoz, 2009a).

7.2.3 Care as 'doing the right thing'

Another returning issue in the discussion of sociality versus responsibility, was the role of alcohol, and the extent to which volunteers should or should not facilitate the consumption of alcohol. This was particularly the case for student communities. Participants generally noted the larger uptake of alcohol-related events compared to sober events, and problematised this disparity. On one hand, organising nights out, bar crawls, and club nights was something that was seen as an expectation placed on LGBT+ student communities. It was seen as something so ingrained in university LGBT+ life that to *not* partake in this, would be seen as a relinquishing of responsibilities, and a missed opportunity to meet potential new members at the level of their expectations. On the other hand, reinforcing the idea of LGBT+ spaces as always already drinking spaces, was seen as a harmful equation of LGBT+ sociality with intoxication.

This centrality of alcohol-centred events was firstly concerning to some participants for the people that it might exclude - Feliks, for instance, brought up that alcohol-related events were maybe more appealing to undergraduate students who were new to adult/student life, but might alienate older students, students with mental health difficulties and/or neurodiverse students, or students who for other reasons might want quieter ways to be social with other students. Scout, separately, brought up the high statistical prevalence of drug and alcohol addiction (e.g. Shahab *et al.*, 2017; Abrahão *et al.*, 2022) within LGBT+ communities as a reason to collaborate with their university's sober society, rather than only organising events centred around alcohol.

Participants also had different perspectives on how socials and alcohol-centred events related to the potential of a more activist image of the community. On one hand these events were seen as a way to reach those LGBT+ students who may not initially be politically engaged, but might become more engaged if they were eased into the wider LGBT+ community through more leisurely activities first. On the other hand, a concern was that high engagement in leisure events was directly contingent upon community members *disengaging* with other types of events.

This concern makes sense, given wider political trends within student representative bodies in the UK: Students' Unions, for instance, have increasingly moved away from being a collective through which to express political engagement, and moved towards taking on the responsibility of providing 'the student experience' (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2014). This is partially through the creation of social events which position the student as a consumer (including consumption of alcohol) and the Students' Union as a provider, rather than thinking of this relation in collaborative or co-creative terms. This dynamic creates a dichotomy between the expectations that people bring to the community, versus the knowledge gained over time within these communities. Feliks explicitly commented on the difficulty of managing this dichotomy:

> "In business terms, manage the expectations of your market, but then actually do the right thing [...] You want to cater to what they want and cater to those social and alcohol-centred occasions, but there's an element of like, do we know better? Do we know that maybe we shouldn't be constantly putting out nights out on the weeknight."
>
> -Feliks

Notably, in the first sentence Feliks juxtaposes a 'business terms' interpretation of how a student society should be run, as not necessarily the same as 'do[ing] the right thing', explicitly divorcing

market logic from morality, and in the same breath prioritising morality. What is further fascinating about this excerpt, was that it emerged in the context of a discussion on how to best build sustainable communities. In this discussion Feliks talked about feeling that it was his responsibility as an older and more experienced student to steer younger students to events that were more sustainable towards interaction. His examples included book groups, peer mental health support groups or coffee mornings. At the same time, he also acknowledged that he would probably not have joined these events himself when he was just starting university.

In Feliks' conceptualisation of 'doing the right thing', he seems to argue for a prescriptive view of care, health, and responsibility. This is remarkable, because the underlying adherence to linear time and instructive (rather than dialogical) pedagogies, is not reflected in other parts of Feliks' narrative, nor in the stories of other participants. Indeed, the notion that age confers a responsibility to guide younger people towards 'the right thing' should set off alarm bells. This is in the first place because a linear interpretation of life experiences and associated (in)competence tends to reaffirm a bioessentialist notion of youth, leaving young people subject to the authority of those older than them (Soung, 2011)[29]. Furthermore, this normative interpretation of age conveying wisdom, is a narrative which quickly becomes used against LGBT+ people, as it interlinks with notions of familial heterosexual reproduction and parental wisdom which LGBT+ people have historically been excluded from (Halberstam, 2005). LGBT+ people, as a result, are quickly interpreted as 'delayed' or 'stuck' in a pre-reproductive, childlike state (Muñoz, 2009a, p. 98).

Of course, timelines of reproduction are not just familial or heterosexual, they are at the same time also a reproduction of the capitalist, non-disabled body. It is no surprise that there have

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[29] Indeed, Janet Batsleer notes that an integral part of voluntary engagement with informal education, lies in the freedom *not* to engage with this education, no matter how much evidence there is that this engagement may be beneficial (Batsleer, 2008, p. 94).

been many academic responses which instead explore how this queer sense of ‘delay’ or ‘stuck-ness’ can be an entry into resisting these normative timelines. This may be exactly through examining the effects of ill-health, risk-taking, and intentional (self-)destruction of the body, compromising the ability of the body to reproduce or to work (Edelman, 2004). Similarly, the non-linear, non-familiar queer connections forged through pleasure, self-destruction, ephemerality, and *un*sustainability, in settings specifically surrounding alcohol, drugs, and dance, have been widely studied in both academic settings and in popular writing. These investigations have solidified bar and club culture as an integral part of LGBT+ socialising (Muñoz, 2009b; Jones, 2021; Lin, 2021a).

To return to Feliks’ words, I would like to add another angle to this debate, breaking the artificial dichotomy of prescription versus liberation: what cannot be dismissed here is Feliks’ own meaning-making around care and continuity. The satisfaction of ‘doing the right thing’ is partially a result of knowing that he is providing something that he would have needed at that age, even if this need is only identified and fulfilled retrospectively. I therefore would like to interpret his words as not (just) a prescription of how life should be lived and how bodies should be treated, but instead as a retrospective sense of care toward a former self. The gesture of prescription is not futile, despite knowing that there may be nobody who listens, because it is not futile *to him*. Similarly, the gesture is not necessarily an enforcement of normative power, *because* there may be nobody who listens. This contradiction, and Feliks’ perseverance despite this contradiction again points towards a complex interpretation of how care does and should circulate within LGBT+ communities, and what it means to remain attached to giving care even if this is not received gladly, or even at all.

7.3 Rethinking ‘success’

In the previous section it has hopefully become clear that the effectiveness, meaningfulness and ‘use’ of LGBT+ care and community are not necessarily measured in quantitative ways (amount of policies put through, amount of people who show up to events, amount of people who listen to someone’s advice, etc.). However, this is in conflict with wider educational notions of success, which has historically been conceptualised within measurable terms that orient themselves towards a linear reproductive futurity: a stable career, a high position on the league tables, or good grades (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2013; Palmer, 2015). In this section I propose that voluntary LGBT+ communities can help us renegotiate how we approach concepts of ‘success’ within university systems at all.

Having covered the aspects of voluntary organising that were experienced as frustrating or demoralising, especially in relation to notions of care, I want to turn now to those features of volunteering that might initially *seem* negative when approaches quantitatively, but can actually open up new ways of thinking about organising within the institution of the university. These may include slow progress, lack of institutional integration, and low uptake of events. While my participants did not straightforwardly ‘flip’ these dynamics to narrate them as unequivocally positive, they instead switched between interpreting them as barriers to be overcome *and* as forms of resistance against a uniform way of measuring success. I argue that the tension that this switching creates allows for a counter-hegemonic perspective of the university, and can therefore be at its most useful when unresolved.

I am working here from the perspective of Risberg and Corvellec’s discussion of diversity work as being ‘work without end’ (Risberg and Corvellec, 2022): they argue that organisational change, especially in the context of diversity should not be a question of success and failure

because that presumes that there is a fixed, non-flexible, and non-context-dependent endpoint to the interventions as well as fixed parameters regarding who gets to decide what success looks like. They therefore focus on the idea of *trying*, a constant grappling with ambiguities of situations, rather than trying to find a way to resolve or achieve them. Note here that this is a different interpretation of the Ahmedian frustration with diversity work as unending because institutions are unwilling to change at all: for Risberg and Corvellec, accepting the unendingness *a priori* is a way to question preconceived notions of procedure and value, rather than an acceptance that nothing might change at all.

7.3.1 Slowness and difficulty as necessity

> "Knowing older people has been really helpful, knowing that some things take a while to happen, or take several goes, or take several tries but they do happen."
>
> -Graham, focus group 2

Graham, as one of the older participants in the group, was in a relatively unique position to be able to contrast his long-term involvement over the course of twenty years in LGBT+ organising, with the short-term involvement that most students experience within their networks. However, even participants with much less longitudinal involvement with LGBT+ communities, tended to see their efforts within a scale that was larger than their individual engagement: one theme that recurred throughout the interviews and focus groups, was the trust that even if nothing seems to change very quickly, it is still worth putting in time and effort to make things happen. The knowledge gained through trying, failing and trying again (but slightly differently), can still be valuable and generative, even if this does not express itself in a linear way.

Restarting holds a particular place in narratives of LGBT+ identities and communities. In part, the renegotiation of one's place in the world and one's relationships to others will be a familiar

feeling for those who have had anything approaching a ‘coming out’. Furthermore, as we saw in chapter 4, the idea of a cyclical chronology of care is exciting when one finally has an idea of what would have been helpful in one’s youth. The fact that ‘what I would have wanted’ is such a ubiquitous starting point for many LGBT+ volunteers, speaks to the powerful role that non-linear time holds in the imagination of LGBT+ communities.

Restarting also goes against normative ideas of familial and/or capitalist reproduction. Familial reproduction in the West relies on a biolegal ‘handing down the line’ of genes, family names, property, and capitalist reproduction relies on a linear, ever-increasing production of goods, knowledge, workers. Restarting, however, interrupts this seemingly-unbreakable chain. Restarting means a letting-go, or a breaking-down of the established order of things, and trying something new (Halberstam, 2011). It means not just useful knowledge being lost, it also means knowledge about the self being lost, knowledge that fixes one into place. Restarting can be part of the undoing that is so exciting about forging new connections. This is something I particularly appreciated about community-building in a student context, as every September there was a regeneration of membership. While this could be seen as a loss of knowledge, it was also a gaining of new friends and new insights, new ways to establish one’s own connection to the others around you.

Like Graham, Orla also experienced a sense of having to ‘take several tries’ to be able to find a format that worked for her group. Many students wanted to join the events and online groups she set up, but felt like they were not able to, as they might be outed to their families and local communities. Orla was initially very unhappy with the low turnout for her first event, describing it as ‘disappointing’ and ‘awkward’, especially when she compared it to more well-attended events that she had taken part in as an undergraduate. However, when she realised how many people had *intended* to come, she reinterpreted the situation differently. Instead of seeing the event as

proof that people were not interested in the society at all, she tried to figure out why there was such a large part of the student body that had registered for the event without showing up. Focusing on interacting with this group and finding out their barriers to participation convinced Orla to “just keep pushing”, and her efforts eventually resulted in the creation of the anonymous newsletter, as discussed in chapter 5. Orla’s initial event could have easily been used as evidence that the LGBT+ student network was unnecessary or unwanted, and that the society committee would be better off putting their efforts in another place. However, to Orla it was not the effort itself that needed changing or diminishing, but rather the approach she took to expressing this effort. Knowing that people *tried* to attend, to the best of their ability, meant that she just had to meet people within the scope of this ability, rather than having to generate the desire to attend altogether.

By describing the practice and knowledge-gaining of volunteering in this cyclical, rather than linear nature, Orla and Graham move away from a conceptualisation of success that favours direct and obvious results. Instead, the focus lies on how obstacles can force you to slow down and take in the situation in which you have found yourself, rather than continuously moving forward in an unbroken, uninterrupted path to success. Indeed, when talking about the institutional delay in getting things done, Graham noted that the encountering of obstacles can in fact be an orienting device, arguing that “it’s really not that hard, and if it <u>is</u> that hard, that’s probably worth doing”. This was an elaboration on the same conversation where Hui Ting expressed her unease with interactions that went too smoothly, a sentiment which was explored in chapter 5. Finding things to be difficult can here not just be an unfortunate *side-effect* of that which should be changed, but can actually be an *indicator* of the power structures that are most deeply ingrained and most stubborn, but therefore also most necessary to change. Difficulty and tension are not just there to be overcome or resolved, they can be integral to the creation of community.

7.3.2 Lack of integration - no institutional governance

The conversation between Hui Ting and Graham also provided alternative perspectives on what it means for LGBT+ communities to consider themselves integrated with the universities in which they are positioned. In conversations about institutional care, there was a particular frustration with universities not seeming to care for the LGBT+ staff communities within its institution. This often went hand-in-hand with a discussion of the low level of inclusion (or complete exclusion) of LGBT+ network activities as part of contractual workload calculations. However, Graham offered an alternative view of what it means to do voluntary work outside the realm of remuneration:

> "I don't have to do it. Or I might feel like I'm obliged to do it for ethical reasons, emotional reasons, community reason [but] my employer does not tell me to do this work. It is not my job, it is not in my job description [...] we can end up opposing the employer, we can be doing something the employer does not want."
>
> -Graham, focus group 2

Most participants *wanted* voluntary work included in working and/or studying structures, both as an official way to value the work being done, and to guarantee *that* the work gets done with a certain regularity and to a certain standard. Graham, on the other hand, notes that being taken up into these structures means the potential for a compromise on what kind of work *can* be done within the university. Not having voluntary work integrated into one's job instead provides a critical distance between the employee and employer. This then prompted Hui Ting to reflect on the inclusion of her group within the university:

> "It's one of those things that they probably value for the wrong reasons? [...] It kind of felt like sometimes they just wanted us to be there to say that there are people in this community, and then they could put

that on their brochures and stuff like that. But then at the same time I don't think that they necessarily appreciated that the people who volunteer were probably passionate about something, and actually wanted to see something happen?"

-Hui Ting, focus group 2

Hui Ting and Graham here make explicit distinction between institutional evaluation and community evaluation of the role and outcomes of LGBT+ university activities, and how this does not only require a renegotiation of how 'successful' outcomes are measured, but also a consideration of why it is that people start doing this kind of work in the first place. Volunteering work requires a different, non-monetary structure of relating to the institution. A similar observation along this line was made by Feliks, when his focus group discussed the differences between paid and unpaid work. He described how students' unions often have a workforce of both volunteers and paid staff members doing very similar work, but that the distinction to him lay in the "emotional reward of doing it", and that paid work was not as rewarding as voluntary work. This was followed by Feliks noting that he was able to assert his boundaries in terms of workload much easier as a volunteer, because there was no financial compensation - there was no expectation or demand placed on his time, which there *would* be if he was a paid member of staff. This seems to return us to the interpretation of LGBT+ communities as akin to Third Places: the introduction of a formalised or obligatory component to a space, even if this is financially beneficial, may work to ruin the value of the space as *chosen* rather than imposed.

Indeed, this was also my own experience of volunteering, particularly in relation to confidence-building: I would never have put myself forward for a paid position organising events, providing pastoral care, and doing comms work, when I did not have any experience doing these things. However, doing this in a voluntary capacity meant that the stakes were so immensely low that there was a certain sense of independence in this role: if I do it wrong, I

have nobody to officially answer to. Because the expectation is zero, I only have to make sure I do not do active harm for my work to have provided a net positive influence on this community. Similar to Graham, Feliks also mentioned that volunteering meant that the kind of work that he wanted to do was within his control:

“[Your work] is directed by what you want to see. And you know that you’re not gonna have to continue doing it if someone above you says to you ‘we’re changing directions now, we’re going to target a different market’.”

-Feliks, focus group 1

I am particularly interested in Feliks’ use of ‘target[ing] a different market’ to describe the managerial decisions one has to contend with in paid employment. This business-like language stands in sharp contrast to the emotional language of getting ‘euphoria’ from work, or doing ‘what you want to see’. While the notion of passion as ‘payment’ for work has been heavily criticised as a slippery-slope into exploitation (McRobbie, 2015), Feliks slightly reverses this dynamic by arguing that he would not have been *as* passionate about the work if he had been paid for it, or might not even have done the work in the first place. Working in the currency of care means moving away from the dichotomy that declares work as *either* remunerated *or* exploitative. Instead, Feliks draws a different distinction between the work being done with care, versus the work not being done at all.

7.3.3 No uptake - the potential is enough

One recurring problem for volunteers was the lack of uptake of events by other (non-organising) members of their communities. This section will explore what it means to put in a lot of work, only for nobody to show up. I will do this in the first place through reference to Alexa’s

experiences, before tying her experiences to those of the other participants[30]. Alexa's work was delimited by several structural barriers that caused particular frustrations: firstly, she set up her university's LGBT+ student society, and therefore did not have the luxury of working within pre-established frameworks. Furthermore, as a student on a one-year degree, her volunteering work was characterised by the almost immediate need to search for someone to take over the work into the next year, or else face the immediate collapse of her student society.

By the time Alexa had gone through the administrative necessities to formalise the group, she was already near the end of her degree, and needing to find someone else to hand over to. At the time of the interview, the student society had been delisted from the university website because nobody had taken on the responsibility of running it after Alexa. Here we can think back on the temporal difficulties with digital record-keeping, as explored in chapter 6: from the perspective of a new student, it is as if the society never existed in the first place, as if Alexa had never done any work at all. Understandably, much of the discussion returned to the disappointment and isolation that Alexa felt about putting in a lot of effort for a short-lived society, and not finding her effort reflected in other people:

> "We had a few events, and then the first one was kind of well attended, and it was really good and loads of people came. We just had a drop-in discussion which was great. But then those people didn't sign up for the mailing list or didn't come to the next event, and it's just very hard when you're the only person who seems to have the momentum behind it?"
>
> -Alexa

[30] In this section I specifically analyse the differences people encountered between their expectations and the reality of event uptake. As a result, I will use slightly more block quotes than in previous sections/chapters, as this allows me to illustrate how participants established these juxtapositions in speech.

However, when I asked her later about her biggest achievement in her role, she said that the first event she put on was impactful to her, even if it was not the start of a well-attended *series* of events, and relatively singular in its success:

> "There's people who connected from that event who could potentially still speak to each other [...] it's nice to think that because connections were made then, that people maybe feel a little bit less like… not alone, but that there's no one else like them at university. Because they might have made connections from that, so that was nice."
>
> -Alexa

Through her use of modal verbs ('could', 'might') and the use of hedging signifiers ('potentially', 'maybe'), we can see that Alexa here emphasises as valuable not the effects of the event that she can immediately see or feel herself, but instead the necessarily utopian *potential* that the event signifies: since Alexa does not have a platform anymore through which she can remain in contact with attendees, the imagination of their continued interaction can only ever be that - imagination. Yet, far from being dispirited by this, Alexa approaches this imagination in a hopeful way: communal longevity here is not assured or even experienced, but it is indexed in its potential. Feliks similarly argued that there was significant potential in events that might not have the desired or expected turnout:

> "People get so hung up on hurdles that stop them, you know 'if I don't have <u>this</u> person involved or make sure that this is all perfect, then I'm not going to do it at all' [...] You know, I think that having a community event for just four people here and there is still really meaningful, 'cause you're making a difference for <u>those</u> four students?"
>
> -Feliks

In combination with Alexa's words, this shows an interesting navigation of utopianism, versus practical constrictions: on one hand, there is the need to keep in mind the ideal outcome of an event, and facilitate in such a way that there is a potential for this outcome to be reached. On the other hand, becoming too attached to an ideal can also work to make one stuck in the disappointment of not being able to find a way to attain this ideal, meaning that nothing happens at all.

Alexa and Feliks mainly talked about volunteering as a negative experience in which positive outcomes could be found. Graham, on the other hand, presented this the other way round: he talked mainly about his positive experiences meeting new people, and strengthening his own network-building skills, and learning the internal workings of the organisations he partnered with through consistent interaction, but then tagged on the fact that this is not always the norm:

> "There's quite a lot just keeping showing up to things and being willing to put a lot of time and effort into sometimes not very good things, or things that didn't work very well or are frustrating. Because sometimes it works, sometimes it just works. Sometimes it's just the right time or if people join in with things. Most of the time it doesn't."
>
> -Graham

This final 'tag' at the end of his sentence ('most of the time it doesn't') was quite unexpected when I first heard it. Throughout this paragraph Graham was already discussing the difference between the amount of time and effort he consistently put into his volunteering ('a lot'), versus the disappointing output that this sometimes results in. However, it is only in the very last sentence that he makes unambiguously known that actually, the positive experiences that result from perseverance are not just far from guaranteed - they are in fact an aberration to his usual

experiences. The moments where his perseverance pays off are hereby reduced almost to a structured serendipity: only possible through proactive involvement, but not guaranteed by it.

Participants also explicitly discussed the role *of* normative narratives around impact and success, and how this inhibited the work that they were able to produce. For instance, Frankie mentioned that she was able to see the emotional impact of her work delivering educational LGBT+ workshops within her university, and that this impact was consistent even if it only occurred in small numbers. Frankie mentioned interacting with many people who did not think that the workshops were necessary anymore, as LGBT+ issues more broadly were no longer necessary points of discussion. She concurred that not *everyone* in the room was always affected by the content of the workshop. However, Frankies said that there was at least one person for whom it was impactful *each time*: she described how “every single solitary time” she convened the workshop, someone either cried because of the emotional impact, or someone came out to her. Because of seeing these reactions up close, Frankie was able to value her volunteering in a way that would go under the radar if the work were to be valued by quantitative measurements.

This story echoes Feliks’ notion of every encounter being an opportunity to create an ‘in’ for those who are new to LGBT+ communities, even if this means that work happens with very small numbers at a time. This navigation of ‘impact’ as measured qualitatively rather than quantitatively, is in contrast with diversity research which tends to aim for implementations that reach as large an audience as possible. However, it is exactly in line with the ethos that what matters in diversity work, is *trying*.

7.3.4 Stopping

In this chapter I have spent a lot of time investigating what it means to *retain* attachment to a community or to volunteering, even when this attachment might seem illogical or detrimental. I have argued that positioning of this attachment as *only* excessive, overlooks the ways in which persistent care can be a foundation for the imagination of different university values. However, this of course does not mean that any and all attachment is *actually* useful or desirable, just because some attachments can be interpreted in this way. Therefore, in this penultimate section I also want to examine the value of letting an attachment go.

One way of 'letting go' was more or less inevitable through the structure of student-led organising: it is practically impossible to be a student forever, and realistically most student volunteers are unlikely to stay in their roles for more than about three years. The quick committee turnovers that resulted from the yearly exodus of students, were mainly thought of as inefficient forms of governance, a structure that makes it difficult to retain knowledge. However, Archie also warned against the possibility of retaining organising committees for too long. They noted that the desire for people to stay within particular roles sometimes resulted in these people staying on for an MA or a PhD at the university. In Archie's view, this indicated a desire to hold onto a powerful position within LGBT+ spaces, which also restricted the *kinds* of knowledge that could circulate in a space like that. Archie argued that it would require "an entire shift in who held the power in those spaces for it to change".

In this instance, we can see a quick turnover not as a loss of knowledge, but also as an opportunity for new knowledge structures to emerge. This can be both a result of shifting power structures, as well as giving rise to these power shifts. Graham too argued that it was necessary to "let other people have a go", particularly people from those demographics that have

traditionally been excluded from LGBT+ spaces. He also noted that the necessity for the same people to keep going in volunteering, was a result of responsibilities being shifted onto a small group of people. While he clarified that he did not want to become “assimilated or just corporatised or bought out,” he did want to reach a point where the responsibilities of creating and maintaining LGBT+ community spaces had become mainstream.

In terms of this division of responsibility, Archie and I further talked about a volunteering organisation that we had both been part of, which was not strictly a university-based organisation. Nevertheless, the vast majority of volunteers in this organisation were students or recent graduates, and we discussed the ethics of working with young people with little experience of formal work environments, in a setting that demands a lot of emotional investment, and ties a lot of responsibility to this investment. Archie said that there is always a potential for people to give more to a cause that is meaningful to them, and that good community-building practice includes a discussion of the limits there are to this ‘giving’.

Stopping here can mean gaining a healthier understanding of one’s own boundaries, where the responsibility of providing community does not need to be down to the singular individual. Similarly, if in the previous section it became clear that every interaction is an opportunity for meaningful engagement, then it follows that every interaction not had, is an opportunity to miss out on this meaningful engagement. This potential for the excessive attachment to LGBT+ communities to be an overwhelming responsibility, resonated with other participants. For instance, Marcela discussed how she dealt with the fact that sometimes her exams or coursework meant that she was unable to commit to LGBT+ related work:

"And if that doesn't work out, sometimes being able to accept in my head that like, I'm not an evil person for not going to this event because I have to do an essay or something. Just like trying to mentalise that sometimes stuff doesn't work out."

-Marcela

We can link this forgiveness back to the discussion in chapter 4, where participants talk about 'what they would have wanted'. As much as the provision of services and spaces is narrated through a reference to the younger self, so too is the setting of boundaries here narrated as a way of doing justice to a part of the self that sees inadequacy in the realm of productivity as an ontological 'evil'. Marcela here goes against a neoliberal approach to work which celebrates the go-getter who 'has it all' and manages to achieve perfect balance in all aspects of life (Rottenberg, 2017). Instead, she argues for an approach that understands the fact that sometimes people simply need to *not* do work at all. Sometimes, stuff doesn't work out.

7.4 Conclusion - the necessary paradoxes of volunteering

At several points in my life I have quit my position on voluntary LGBT+ committees, both within and outside the university, often because I felt like my suggestions for how to conduct the spaces were not being listened to, and instead I was being positioned as someone who complains for the sake of complaining (Ahmed, 2021, p.1). Sometimes this has felt like a result of explicitly racialised and gendered marginalisation expressing itself in an LGBT+ community context. Sometimes there were just individual people in the group that annoyed me. Every time this has happened, my friends have reacted as if I have just come out of an unsustainable interpersonal relationship, telling me that it's good I am finally gone, and they had expected me to leave much sooner, and anyway it was the community's loss. Yet in every new setting I find myself in (new cities, new jobs, new hobbies) my first instinct is to find the nearest possible LGBT+ group. Indeed, part of the background to this research was my intrigue (towards myself

and others) around why I keep coming back to these spaces when they can be so immensely frustrating. Or is it *because* they are so frustrating? Is it because they are frustrating *in a particular way*?

It is no mistake that much more of this chapter's data comes from the focus groups, rather than the one-on-one interviews. In general, the tone of the focus groups ran much more critical of universities as institutions, even though I did not specifically ask questions that would necessitate critical answers - I think this is partially explained through the fact that in the focus groups, all participants had already met me, and might therefore feel less of an obligation to keep the tone light, compared to an initial meeting. However, I also think that it is because the *sharing* rather than the mere *telling* of experiences lends itself to the identification of structural problems, and the circulation of collective feeling - in this case frustration, but also care and hope. In this way, the focus groups, like the communities we were discussing, became the 'something' that allowed for experiences to be shared, that facilitated the undoing of the individual in the face of the other. They allowed for this vulnerable level of earnest caring, that both facilitates and is facilitated by LGBT+ community groups.

Many of these feelings were contradictory or paradoxical, and so are the practical implications for further work: on one hand there is a strong need to provide spaces where people can show up without *needing* to do anything, on the other hand this requires a certain diligence on behalf of the organisers. On one hand there is the implication that it is worthwhile and even necessary to keep going even in the face of seeming 'failure', on the other hand it is necessary to stop thinking of people as inexhaustible sources of labour. How cruel that the benefits of LGBT+ communities are contingent upon, *but not even guaranteed by* a requirement to keep going in the face of failure. This cruelty can be frustrating to work with, and can be cause for intra-community conflict when people have different ideas of how to best go about navigating it.

However, this does not mean that it is altogether unhelpful to think about what this navigation means, even if it is not a conundrum to be ‘solved’. The refusal to solve or simplify these paradoxes of care and effort might therefore be an example of the dynamic that Risberg and Corvellec outline when they talk about institutional ‘trying’: in attempting to apply simple solutions to complex sites of affect and responsibility, we are doing a disservice to the multifacetedness of these spaces altogether.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion - Trying, failing, trying again

8.1 Introduction - what do you want to 'do' with your research?

I started this thesis by describing my experience of volunteering as one that felt incredibly rewarding and valuable, even as it was physically and emotionally exhausting. The care I felt for my community and the friendships I made while volunteering, outweighed the fact that it was an incredibly time-consuming and often frustrating experience. It was exactly this complex layering of emotions that made me (and many of my co-volunteers) feel so used whenever we were paraded around as a sign of diversity at the university: the full experience of being a volunteer, including the difficulty and intricacy of the work, was flattened into one easily-digestible happy image.

Similarly, when people ask me what I am actually researching, I can still feel myself being both excited and embarrassed at having to explain the focus of this thesis. Excited, because I know that talking about my research has led to interesting conversations. Other volunteers or community organisers, whether they focus on LGBT+ causes or not, have recognised their own experiences in the dynamics I describe. They have often felt comforted by the knowledge that they are not the only ones facing the emotional and structural difficulties of caring for a cause in the context of an institution that does not see value in their care. My embarrassment comes when people ask what I intend to 'do' with my research. This is in the first place because it is difficult to describe a project that sits between Education Studies and Sexuality Studies, while taking its methodologies from Media Studies, Linguistics, and Sociology - just as disciplinary orthodoxy can look like expertise, interdisciplinarity can feel like a cover for indecision. What also does not help that very few of these fields hold high social esteem. Indeed, they are the

archetypal Mickey Mouse degrees, the disciplines that are presumed to require so little skill that anyone can do them.

Yet, as the conversations with my participants show, there clearly *is* value, joy, and expertise in LGBT+ volunteering, as is there value, joy, and expertise in talking about LGBT+ volunteering or researching LGBT+ volunteering. However, this value, joy, and expertise is not necessarily straightforwardly or uncomplicatedly attained. As such, they are not easily measured in the manners that are favoured in neoliberal academia, through rapid publications, lucrative job prospects, or immediate bite-sized solutions to pressing problems. Again, the need to squeeze a complex situation into a simple (and preferably happy) elevator pitch, does a disservice to the depth of this situation. It is not that I have no answer for what I want to 'do' with my conclusion, it is more that what I want to 'do' may not be recognisable as valuable if we operate under a marketised notion of what 'value' entails.

Throughout this thesis, I have unpacked how particular ideas about the value of LGBT+ volunteering come to circulate within universities. I have also unpacked how LGBT+ volunteers may subsequently refute these institutional ideas in their volunteering work, while at the same time having to navigate the limitations created by these narratives. In chapter 2 I gave an overview of the legislative, social, and academic histories that form the background against which my research has been set. This included the neoliberalisation of English Higher Education, the incorporation of LGBT+ communities into neoliberalism, and the subsequent critiques that emerged from writing in Queer Theory and critical pedagogy. In chapter 3, I discussed the theoretical and practical considerations in designing and conducting my research, including the need to research LGBT+ communities *as* communities. I explained how an investigation into communal narratives required an interactional mode of data collection (interviews and focus groups, in my case) to see how people *within* LGBT+ communities talk

about their everyday experiences, combined with an analysis of *outward*-facing narratives (in my case, student experience videos and EDI webpages). Similarly, in order to fully appreciate how notions of ‘LGBT+ community’ could be taken up differentially depending on context, the analysis required a post-structuralist approach to language and signification, as well as a reflexive, situated approach to incorporating personal experiences.

In chapter 4, I examined why people might want to get involved in university-based LGBT+ volunteering. Drawing on the concept of Third Place (Oldenburg, 1999), I argued that the attraction of LGBT+ volunteering lies in the potential of creating a ‘community of strangers’. However, where the Third Place is centred around individual consumption, LGBT+ volunteers found value in the more dialogical elements of interaction such as those one might find in informal learning (Freire, 1996; Batsleer, 2008). This was enacted both through gathering people together who were perceived to have *a priori* shared experiences, as well as valuing the sharing of experiences *as a process*. In an example of a queer use of time and imagination (Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2009a), volunteers often used their past experiences of disappointment or frustration as a guide to carving out their own ‘desire paths’ (Ahmed, 2006), creating the spaces that they would have wanted to see when they were younger.

In chapter 5, I elaborated on what these spaces might practically look like: I noted that my participants implicitly worked with a performative understanding of collective and individual identity construction (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). This meant that a successful LGBT+ community identity required both explicit signalling through naming or imagery, *as well as* repeated reiteration over time through action. However, my participants were also strategic in their navigation of community construction, for instance in the intentional blurring of boundaries between in-group and out-group through the presence of allies. This blurring was necessary for some community participants, as it was not safe for everyone to always be seen to interact with

LGBT+ communities, if this implicitly conveyed a personal identification as LGBT+ as well. While participants found creative solutions to include those who could not publicly affiliate themselves with their communities, LGBT+ communities were still seen to disproportionately attract homogenous groups, which in this context often meant that they were seen as overwhelmingly white and cisgender spaces. The pandemic further changed who was able to participate: although some people found it more difficult to interact with one another digitally, for others this prompted a reconsideration of what their ‘community of strangers’ might look like, along the lines of disability justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; The Care Collective *et al.*, 2020).

In chapter 6 I further elaborated on how particular aspects of LGBT+ communities can become visible within the university, where others may remain hidden. Participants were generally quite sceptical of university visibility, as it was seen as highly selective and time-bound (e.g. platforming LGBT+ communities only during Pride month), rather than conveying genuine ongoing care for these communities. Particularly the discussions that emerged as a result of (potential) university disaffiliation from the Stonewall employers scheme was seen as affirming discourses that hold trans-inclusion to be incompatible with academic freedom and academic rigour (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020; Slater, 2023), as well as under-valuing the work that volunteers do to get a high ranking in the scheme. Similarly, the analysis of three universities’ student videos and EDI webpages, showed that universities preferred to show their LGBT+ communities as exciting products to be encountered on an individual basis, rather than communities of collective and ongoing effort. Furthermore, the universities portrayed their diversity efforts as highly future-oriented, meaning that there was very little reflection on why a formalised LGBT+ community might be necessary in the first place.

In chapter 7, I drew on theoretical conceptions of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) and precarity (Butler, 2004a) to understand why people continue to volunteer, when there is so little institutional recognition of volunteering work, and when so little space is made for this work. I argued that the continued care that volunteers show for their work can be seen through a queer lens of (excessive) attachment to that which is deemed un-valuable, doomed to failure, or not worth caring about (Halberstam, 2011; Sontag, 2018). I explored how participants narrated the need for unenforced care, and how this care became a political act in the face of a society or an institution that does not position LGBT+ communities as worth caring about. I then examined how LGBT+ volunteering further challenges the linear notions of success that are so prevalent within English Higher Education. I noted how my participants saw slow and difficult progress, small turnouts, and a lack of institutional uptake as potentially beneficial for the transformative functioning of LGBT+ communities. However, participants also noted that it was good to set boundaries and know when to stop volunteering.

Both my experiences as a volunteer, as well as the fact that I chose to research LGBT+ volunteering, felt like examples of cruel optimism: setting out to do something very specific that feels very necessary, and then finding that the reality is much more complicated and involves spending a lot of time convincing people that you are nonetheless doing useful work. Yet I (and many others with me) continue to stick with it, not just *in spite of* the difficulties that volunteering and research bring with them, but *because* of these difficulties. It is this ability to hold multiple, often contradictory principles at once that I find so fascinating about LGBT+ spaces, both in my research and in my volunteering. The ability to argue on one hand, that progress should probably feel slow and uncomfortable, lest it simply reify pre-existing power dynamics, while knowing on the other hand that slow and uncomfortable progress is very exhausting to deal with. The ability to see, on one hand, that in-depth interaction might be more easily possible with a small turn-out at events, while also knowing that at this pace it will not be possible to introduce

every LGBT+ person on campus to the community. The ability to know how much more work you could get done if you were only paid for it, while also not wanting to be governed by the university. The ability to recognise that all these notions (and more) are true at the same time, and that the impossibility to achieve all of them should not stop us from *trying*.

Indeed, the most important complexity that this concluding chapter will reflect on, is the fact that the value of *trying* is so foundational to LGBT+ volunteering, much more so than the ability to succeed as a result of this trying, even as trying obviously needs a result to orient itself: we always try to do *something*, we always need to have an ideal in mind of what this trying may achieve, even if this ideal may never come to fruition. As such, what this chapter is arguing for (and really, what I want to 'do' with my research) is the fostering of spaces that encourage *trying*, both in the realms of research and in the realm of volunteering. In the next section, I will answer each research sub-question in turn, before answering my main research question, in order to give an impression of what this trying might look like. I will then examine how my findings challenge academic notions of failure and success, as well as challenging the dichotomy of failure and success altogether. I will finish by providing a set of questions to prompt a continuation of the conversations that my participants started, both within research and within volunteering.

8.2 Research questions

Having given a summary of each chapter, I will now turn to answering the questions that structured these chapters. In chapter 4, I discussed the attraction towards university-based LGBT+ voluntary spaces, at the hand of the following question:

1. *What draws people to LGBT+ volunteering communities?*

My participants were very aware that LGBT+ people are not always brought up in environments that are comfortable or welcoming to them (Halberstam, 2011; Milsom, 2021). Even those who had positive experiences with their biolegal family or who had fond memories of their homes, positioned this as a result of luck, rather than a 'natural' feature of the family and the home. Aligning with long-established queer scholarship on alternative kinship structures (Weston, 1997; Pidduck, 2009; Huang, 2023) and alternative spatialities (Muñoz, 2009a; Lin, 2021b), my participants aimed to carve out a space at university that provided the opportunity to connect to others in a way that centred *choice* in this connection, rather than presenting connection as enforced through biolegal ties, or the circumstances of one's birth.

Indeed, because of this centring of choice, these connections were not imagined as a simple substitute for the biolegal family or the traditional family home. Rather, thinking through the concept of Third Place (Oldenburg, 1999), I argued that the attraction of these spaces lay partially in the opportunity to meet people who had the *shared* experience of being made to feel like a stranger in their environments, and becoming familiar with these other strangers through the process of *sharing* experiences with one another - in short, creating a 'community of strangers'. This ambiguous relationship to familiarity and strangeness was captured in the repeated assertion that participants wanted there to be 'something' for other LGBT+ people within their universities. The shaping of this 'something' was often guided by what participants themselves had felt was missing or inadequate when they arrived at the university. As such, the creation of this 'something' was often imagined as the first step onto a desire path (Ahmed, 2006), making university life more comfortable for subsequent LGBT+ communities. It was the ability to collectively construct this 'something' which drew my participants to their LGBT+ communities.

In chapter 5, I discussed what this ‘something’ may practically look like in terms of community participants. This discussion was guided by the following question:

2. *Who gets to participate in LGBT+ volunteer communities and what are the experiences of different people participating in them?*

In line with Eleanor Formby’s findings on usage of the term ‘LGBT+ community’ (Formby, 2017), my participants too used these words in varied, highly contextual, and often reflexive ways. Who was seen to be constitutive of ‘LGBT+ community’ was considered both an identitarian question (i.e. someone *is* or *is not* a member of an LGBT+ community), as well as a question of intentionality and action (i.e. someone either participates in an LGBT+ community or not). As well as using these different definitions of community themselves in the interviews and focus groups, participants also showed strategic awareness of the potential slippages between the different usages. For instance, some participants made ally-inclusive events, exactly in order to make sure that participation in LGBT+ community events was not seen as implicitly denoting a personal LGBT+ identity.

If it was (potentially deliberately) unclear who was included under the words ‘LGBT+ community’, there was much more clarity on who was *not yet* included. For instance, several participants who worked cross-nationally, had to find creative solutions to allow international community members to participate. Furthermore, research participants noted that LGBT+ communities could (re)inscribe a ‘somatic norm’ (Puwar, 2004) which was overwhelmingly white and cisgender. This was partially seen as a result of universities being exclusionary spaces altogether, but also as a result of university LGBT+ spaces *specifically* working in a manner that attaches comfort to the notion of similarity among its community members. Participants argued, however, that LGBT+ community spaces had a moral imperative to be coalitional rather than

identitarian, including a wide variety of people, even if this means giving up on the comfort of similarity.

In chapter 6 I explored further how community construction was not just imagined and perceived, but also enacted through visible, outward-facing indexes and discourses *about* university LGBT+ communities. The question that structured this chapter was formulated as follows:

3. *To what extent are universities' outward communication about equality, diversity and inclusion work reflective of my participants' experiences?*

Although participants generally saw the concept of 'visibility' as a good thing, they were also sceptical of how visibility could become coopted by the university. This was seen as especially frustrating when universities outwardly implied support for LGBT+ students and staff which was not substantiated by tangible actions or prioritisation of LGBT+ issues. This dynamic can be interpreted through the concept of non-performativity (Ahmed, 2012): the *communication* of institutional care is implied to *enact* this care, but practically nothing has changed for the university's LGBT+ communities. Particularly affiliation with the Stonewall employer scheme was seen as a highly symbolic indication of a university's values. Many participants had volunteered their time to achieve a high Stonewall ranking for their universities, and sometimes a university's ranking was entirely dependent on the work of a single person. However, this work was halted (sometimes very abruptly) in several institutions when Stonewall as an organisation became more publicly controversial. Participants saw this as an indication that the Stonewall ranking was not so much a symbol of genuine care for university LGBT+ communities, or a reward for the work they put into the submission, as it was a promotional instrument for the institution that could be picked up or discarded at will.

This instrumentality of indexes related to LGBT+ community was also evident in my analysis of student experience videos and EDI webpages. These materials followed a long tradition of university advertising which seems merely informative in nature, but is actually highly promotional (Fairclough, 1995; Tlili, 2007; Hartley and Morphew, 2008). Specifically, they continued the trend of presenting the 'university experience' as one that consists of individualised encounters that lend themselves to interaction as a form of consumption, rather than co-creation (Morphew and Hartley, 2006; Palmer, 2015). Where the videos and webpages broached the subject of university (LGBT+) diversity, they tended to focus on the *outcome* of community work, or the ways in which this community work resulted in exciting opportunities to 'consume' diversity (hooks, 2015). Much less discursive space was dedicated to the *process* that preceded it, or indeed the *community* that this work concerns. As such, the institutional images that were most accessible, were those which painted a picture of the university as a joyful, consumer-oriented place, as well as a place that has policy solutions to inequality. However, it does not report on the problems that may have caused this inequality, or the everyday (voluntary) work that goes into the creation of diverse university communities.

In chapter 7, I examined how my participants' work sits within the university conceptually, specifically how their work may challenge the notions of success that have become institutionalised within the English Higher Education sector as a result of continued marketisation. At the same time, I explored how this work is still delineated *by* these notions of success. This exploration was structured at the hand of the following question:

4. *How do practices within university LGBT+ volunteering affirm or subvert neoliberal notions of success?*

Firstly, my participants rejected the individualised, competitive drive towards measurable impact that pervades the marketised university. Instead, they let their work be guided by relatively amorphous concepts like 'care', or indeed the 'something' that volunteering is meant to achieve. This approach was built on a more collective and interactional vision of what a university community may look like (Freire, 1996; The Care Collective *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, the inability to enforce or ensure care was frustrating for my participants. However, it was also the possibility to encounter or provide communal care that oriented volunteering towards utopian thinking (Muñoz, 2009a), as it allows for a questioning and renegotiation of who has traditionally been considered worthy of care, and what providing care may look like.

Furthermore, participants rejected institutionalised markers of 'success' that assume that this success can be measured quantitatively. They saw value in work that progressed slowly, work that was not taken up into the institution, and work that only reached a low number of people. In fact, participants showed that there were circumstances where this institutional 'failure' might actually be preferable, as it provided alternative elements of community that may not necessarily be available through normative avenues (Halberstam, 2011). This included also a rejection of longevity or permanence as the sign that an endeavour has 'succeeded': during the interviews and focus groups, participants explained why they sometimes had to quit or take a step back from their community work. This allowed them an opportunity to rest or focus on other activities, while also allowing the community to regenerate itself through the influx of new members.

The answers to these sub-questions provide an answer to my overarching research question:

What is the value of LGBT+ volunteering communities at university?

The value of LGBT+ volunteering communities at university is their ability to balance between strangeness and familiarity, and the unique insights that this offers. These communities of strangers can provide a stranger's view of the institution, exactly *because* they have had to become familiar with its workings. Because these communities have had to navigate the institution while only being selectively considered part *of* the institution, they are in a position to see where friction or tension between the community and institution may occur. Subsequently, they allow us to envision what an institution may look like where this tension does *not* occur, and what would be required to get to this point. Of course, LGBT+ communities do not bring this value to the institution in a straightforward or uncomplicated way. As we have seen, LGBT+ communities can have their own biases and oversights as well. Even communities of strangers can have their own strangers among them.

Furthermore, pointing out potential frictions and tensions in an institution, often means that there is a chance of being identified *as* the friction or tension in the institution. In Sara Ahmed's words, "when you expose a problem you pose a problem" (Ahmed, 2017). This can be uncomfortable and unsustainable in the long run. However, just because it is uncomfortable and unsustainable, does not mean that it is not worth doing at all. In the next section, I will explore how this alternative view on institutional positioning has been instructive in continuing my practice as an LGBT+ community volunteer.

8.3 Academic failure, academic success

Throughout this thesis, whenever a chapter has been difficult to write or when intellectual paradoxes have seemed impossible to navigate, my first instinct has been to muse on my own writing process. Some of these musings remained an explicit part of the thesis structure (especially in chapter 6), whereas others retreated to the background once I found what the

obstacle to my thinking was. This is one of the many habits I acquired from writing for various LGBT+ organisations: if I am unsure about what I have to bring to the table, this insecurity is probably not just my own, and someone may be helped by having this insecurity voiced. The sharing of emotions first of all can orient us towards a path, but second of all can create this path for other people as well.

Unfortunately, academia is not usually a place where one is expected to show insecurity. As has been discussed throughout this thesis, normative measurements of 'success' in academia tend to favour clear-cut narratives of happiness and achievement, narratives that may be used to increase the university's rank on the league tables (Hazelkorn, 2013) or in university promotional material (Palmer, 2015). Narratives that continuously move forward rather than reflect on how we got to be here (Ahmed, 2006; Sobande, 2019). In pointing out the unhelpfulness of this narrow definition of success, the pointing itself (or indeed the one who points) can quickly become seen as an sign of inadequacy, willfulness, strangeness - being unwilling to be the institutional sign of success or happiness, can be taken up as an admission that one was never a good 'fit' for the institution in the first place, a sign of individual failure.

This may be a risk one needs to take. Indeed, throughout this thesis, I have been arguing that my participants' work shows exactly the benefits of being positioned in this way. And still, even knowing intellectually that this risk is necessary does not automatically make it easier. This is yet another one of the many tensions that my thesis has grappled with: as much as failure, disruption, inadequacy, and strangeness have been celebrated and reclaimed within LGBT+ communities and LGBT+ scholarship, it can be difficult to move away from the sensation that this celebration is a forced one. As chapter 7 has shown, it can be incredibly disheartening to not have one's effort rewarded, even if this effort involves a conscious questioning of what this 'reward' should entail. To what extent can one really say that one 'chooses' failure, if there is no

other choice left? Inadequacy, like any signifier, is a highly socially contingent one. If I cannot help *but* be interpreted as an institutional misfit, is it really *my* choice? This potential to be inevitably seen as inadequate was a concern as I continued my university-based LGBT+ volunteering while conducting research. However, doing this research also provided me with the language and insight to see the value in my work, even when this work did not conform to institutional expectations of 'success'. There are two elements of my volunteering that I specifically want to discuss in this section, as they epitomise the potential for these conceptual framings to be of practical use, namely my attempt to set up a zine workshop, and my involvement with an LGBT+ research conference.

The zine workshop emerged from a desire to meet one final time with my research participants, in a more casual and creative way than the interviews and focus groups. A large part of the motivation for this work has been to make and facilitate new connections, and given that my data collection occurred mostly during periods where COVID-19 restrictions were in place, I felt that it was a shame that my participants had been unable to meet each other in person. The zine workshop was going to be the opportunity to put the theoretical work into practice: providing a platform for participants to meet, a way to have this 'something' that facilitates the exchange of experiences. Similarly, the zine itself would be an artefact in which the knowledge and expertise of volunteers could be captured for future practitioners.

Organising the workshop was difficult, communicatively and infrastructurally. Some participants did not respond to my invite, others were unable to make the date I suggested. In the end only four out of nineteen initial participants confirmed their participation. It took about a month to ensure I could book a room at King's College to hold the workshop in, because of health and safety precautions, and I had to cancel my in-person attendance at a large conference in order to secure the funds for this workshop. I also had to decline opportunities to help out with several

volunteering groups I am a part of, in order to not double-book myself. I am saying this not to elicit a sense of pity, but rather to give an overview of how a seemingly-simple two-hour workshop requires many decisions and much preparatory work. Then, on the day, one of my participants was unable to attend due to illness, and another was stuck on a delayed train. Only two participants made it in the end.

Going through this effort for a few pages of zine content, however interesting and exciting, felt like I had failed at my intention, even if very few of the roadblocks on the way were within my control. Yet, not having a final product in the form of a zine did not detract from the joys of the *process* of the workshop. Even with only three people, we were able to discuss the intricacies of our institutions, sharing strategies, venting frustrations, and providing each other with new insights. Because I still managed to provide the 'something' that is so integral to LGBT+ volunteering, I would not hesitate trying to set up a workshop like this again, even if the turnout ended up being similarly low. Indeed, a lot of my anxiety was alleviated by Feliks' words during our conversation: "I think that having a community event for just four people here and there is still really meaningful, cause you're making a difference for those four students". The only solution to the problems arising in volunteering seems to be to just keep trying: indulge in the cruel optimism that there will be 'something' that comes out of the effort of volunteering, and that this 'something' will make a difference.

Another LGBT+ related project I was involved with on a voluntary basis, was the conference I helped co-found and co-organise, called *Mind the Gap*. The ethos for the conference was to try and gather LGBT+ academics, activists, artists and community organisers together in constructive conversation. We were awarded a grant from our Doctoral Training Partnership, which allowed us to pay anyone we deemed a 'community speaker' (i.e. anyone who did not represent a university during the conference), meaning that we could tangibly, financially give

back to LGBT+ communities. The first year that the conference ran, in 2022, the standard of presentations was high, and the talks were interesting, but the online format made it difficult to see how much speakers actually engaged with each other. The second time the conference ran, the point of the conference was therefore more mundane and less idealistic in my mind: if nothing else was taken away from the conference, it would at least be a movement of finances from the institution to the participant. Providing attendees with a free lunch, and getting the university to agree to giving a couple hundred pounds to LGBT+ community organisers became the goal, and if anything more conceptual was taken away from the conference, it would be a nice bonus. In focusing on these small benefits rather than trying to aim for utopian perfection, I circumvented to a large extent the stress that I had felt in the previous year. Yet, at the same time, a drive *towards* this utopian perfection was still necessary to set up the conference altogether.

Of course, I am not claiming that this individual re-appraisal of volunteering situations is the same as instating institutional change. Nor am I saying that it is helpful to go from interpreting an event as a straightforward failure, to seeing it as a straightforward success. Rather, I am saying that LGBT+ volunteering requires the fostering of spaces that value *trying*, through a continued interrogation and reflexive tension between one's intentions and the practical result. It is the focus on this tension which allows this *trying* to function as an alternative to the dichotomy of success and failure.

8.4 Prompts and further discussions

In the final section of this thesis, I will provide some prompt questions aimed at carving out a conceptual space in which this *trying* can take place. But before I provide these prompts, I will

first answer the question that I struggled with at the beginning of this chapter: what do I want to 'do' with my research?

My research has contributed to LGBT+ educational scholarship by integrating queer theoretical perspectives on epistemology, failure and success, with empirical data collection to investigate how these perspectives relate to the everyday experiences of LGBT+ university volunteers. This integration has led to an analysis that considers not just how educational spaces can be more *inclusive* of LGBT+ people in demographic terms, but also what LGBT+ volunteering communities bring to educational spaces on a more conceptual level. In addition to describing the value of the events, spaces, and support systems that LGBT+ volunteers create, I have also outlined how LGBT+ volunteering provides an altogether transformative view of education, which can be used to question norms and conventions in Higher Education more broadly.

What I want my research to 'do', then, is to further both conceptual and empirical interest in LGBT+ communities *as* communities, in all their contextual specificity, by analysing them not just as conglomerations of people with similar identifications, but as sites with particular (yet ever-changing) habits, values, and cultures. For instance, as discussed in chapter 5, there was little discussion of the practical realities of disability and neurodivergence within university LGBT+ communities, even as many participants seemed to implicitly work from a perspective of disability justice. Gaining a more intricate view of the everyday experiences of disabled and neurodivergent students and staff within LGBT+ communities, can provide an even fuller insight into the ways that universities *and* LGBT+ communities function to reinforce a somatic norm within their population.

Similarly, in casual conversation about my research, people who are not involved in LGBT+ volunteering have often quickly assumed that these communities are just spaces for people to

find sexual and romantic partners. This seemed in line with the institutional presentation of LGBT+ communities as consumptive places, so it was surprising to me that this was not something that my participants touched upon. Given the historically, legally, and socially complex associations between LGBT+ communities, sex, and romance, it is therefore necessary to gain more insight into how these associations are imagined to take shape within the university, be it by volunteers themselves or by people who are outside of LGBT+ volunteering communities.

Lastly, the issues of class and financial status were not very prominent in my participants' discussions. With the increasing cost of living in England, as well as tuition fees that have tripled in just over a decade, the actual monetary cost of going to university is one of the key frictions that allows us to understand the effects of the marketisation of Higher Education. It is therefore necessary to provide further insights into the extent to which university-based LGBT+ communities respond to this marketisation: while LGBT+ communities can provide conceptual challenges to neoliberalisation, does this also extend into challenging the material and financial consequences of such a neoliberal system?

Aside from prompting further academic study, I also aim for this thesis to foster a fascination for LGBT+ volunteering altogether, from the outside as well as from within volunteering communities, within research and volunteering practice. This is again not just in terms of a simple appreciation of the *work* that these communities do, but also a curiosity towards communities as ever-changing cultural entities that both respond to the world around them, and constitute this world. As I discussed in the previous section, I found practical use in my research as it allowed me to renegotiate how I approach my volunteering work.

To conclude this thesis, I have formulated a series of questions that may help other university LGBT+ volunteers to renegotiate their work, it may help non-volunteering colleagues or managerial staff appreciate the value that LGBT+ volunteering brings to universities, as well as illuminating the obstacles that volunteers are faced with. Lastly, it may help community organisers based *outside* universities consider the transferable approaches to 'community' more broadly. These questions are aimed at examining the structures, emotions, discomforts, desires, and habits that govern this work, conceptually and practically. Some of these questions are adapted from my interview schedules (see Appendices), and some of them are questions which, retrospectively, I would have liked to ask my participants. Some are questions that I asked myself when figuring out how to (co-)organise the zine workshop and the conference, in order to get a clearer view of why I was actually doing any of this. They are of course not questions intended to prompt a straightforward answer, and I would argue that if there *is* a straightforward answer to any of them, that might be indicative of a problem within the space.

1. What is this community for? What needs is it fulfilling? What does it mean for these needs to go unfulfilled?

2. Are there other spaces that fulfil this community's needs? How are these spaces governed? How are these spaces funded? Who has access to these other spaces?

3. What information is available about this community to outsiders? Which attributes of the community are emphasised, and which are downplayed? Who is benefiting from this division?

4. When you picture this community in your mind, what do the people look and act like? In what ways are you similar to others in this community and in what ways are you

different?

5. Is there a formalised committee for this community? Are committee meetings characterised by consensus or conflict? How does this affect the work that is done?

6. What resources are available to this community (if any)? Who oversees access to these resources? What are the steps to acquiring resources? Is access to these resources always guaranteed?

7. When someone falls ill, who (if anyone) usually picks up the tasks that need doing? What are the consequences of these tasks not being done at all?

8. What would you see as a 'successful' outcome for this community? What is the basis for your conceptualisation of 'successful' outcomes? What are the consequences (for you or for others) if this outcome is not met?

9. Are there people who might have a different conceptualisation of 'success' for this community? Why might your conceptualisations differ? Can you find a compromise or overlap in your conceptualisations, or are they incompatible?

10. At what point do you think it would stop being 'worth' engaging with this community in the way that you do now? On what is this assessment of 'worth' based?

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Appendix I - Interview schedule

Interview Schedule Students

Purpose	**Text**
I. Introduction Explanation of the project	Hello [name], thank you for agreeing to meet me here online today! Before we start, I'll explain a bit more about myself and the project, and if you have any questions, or if there's anything that is unclear, just let me know. My name is Pippa, I use she or they pronouns, and I'm a PhD researcher at King's College London. I am currently looking at the experiences of LGBT+ volunteers in Higher Education. In order to get a better insight into these experiences, I am conducting a series of interviews with people like yourself, who are currently involved with LGBT+ volunteering or who have been involved with this in the past. The way this interview will work, is that I will first ask you a couple of questions about your university, and your exact role, and then we'll go into more of your experiences during the time that you've been volunteering, and how you see your role in the future. I am interested in the way *you* experience your university, so don't worry about whether you say the 'right' thing, because there are no right or wrong answers! The interview should take about an hour at most.
Recording permission I	I'm about to start the recording, but if at any point you would like to pause or stop the recording, just let me know. Could you just confirm that you agree to being recorded? I will ask the same question again after I've clicked 'record', just to have that on tape.
Recording permission II	You should now see a red dot in your browser, to show you that the For the recording, would you be alright confirming that you are happy to be recorded?
II. Body Double-checking university	[If demographic questions have been returned before interview] Firstly, thank you for taking the time to return some of the questions to me before the interview. I'm just going to confirm that you are based at [University of X], right? [If demographic questions have not been returned before interview] Just before we start, could you please tell me the university at which you are based?

Introduction to university/volunteering	1. What made you want to attend [x] University? 2. What were your expectations of your university before going there? How did you come by these expectations? [if they don't answer this already, ask whether it seemed yyLGBT+ friendly] 3. What was your involvement with LGBT+ communities like before you started attending university? 4. How did you get involved with LGBT+ volunteering at university specifically? 5. Did you have any expectations or ideas about these volunteering roles/groups before you became involved yourself? [if they have a very strong sense of prior expectations: what were these expectations like, compared to your actual experience in the role?]
Experiences of volunteering	6. In your own words, what is the remit of your role? 7. Where do you do most of your work [on campus, in the town/city, in a university building, from home]? 8. If there is anything that you could achieve within your role, what would it be? 9. To what extent do you collaborate with other organisations, on and off campus? [to what extent do you collaborate with the university, or particular parts of the university?] 10. What achievement are you proudest of in your volunteering work? Why are you particularly proud of this? How did you achieve this? [or maybe someone else achieved something, or you collaborated on something that turned out really well?] 11. Have there been any hurdles or difficulties in your time as a volunteer? What were these difficulties? [Who or what was the cause of these difficulties?] 12. Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed or influenced any aspect of your volunteering?
Future of volunteering	13. What would you like to see from future LGBT+ volunteering? 14. Is there anything that you would like to see universities do in the future to support the work that you do? [if they have already been very positive about their university support: or maybe something that your university already does, that you would like to see in other universities as well?]
III. Outro Transition to ending	That was the last question! Is there anything that you would like to add, that we haven't covered here yet?
Thanks and further information	Thank you again so much for participating today! I will stop the recording now.

	Are you alright? Do you have any questions? [if participants are clearly upset or worried, immediately skip to signposting] So I'm just going to explain what happens with the information that we've just talked about: within the next week I'll transcribe this interview, and if you would like a recording of the transcription, please feel free to email me. I will also assign everyone a pseudonym, so your information can't be traced back to you. Is there any name that you would like me to use? Which pronouns would you like me to use when referring to you? You should also receive the 10 pound voucher via email over the next few days, but just be aware that it might end up in your Spam folder. If you haven't received it within three days, just let me know and I'll make sure that that's all fine. I will also be in contact with you regarding a potential follow-up focus group, which will be with other people who have taken part in these interviews as well. This is just to discuss some issues which may have come up during the interviews, and to see whether people would benefit from having a network of people who are doing similar work to them. I will send more detailed information in the email.
Signposting	Lastly, just before we end the call, I'm just going to leave you with a couple of resources. Sometimes talking about these things can be a bit de-stabilising, or can have a big emotional impact, so I'm just going to paste a couple of resources into the chat, and go through them. And even if you don't think you'll use them yourself, it might be helpful for someone you know: [- **LGBT+ Switchboard** (phone 0300 330 0630, email chris@switchboard.lgbt) https://switchboard.lgbt/how-we-can-help - **Samaritans** (phone 116 123, email jo@samaritans.org) https://www.samaritans.org/ - **Crisis** (text HOME to 741741) https://www.crisistextline.org/ - **MindOut** (online support service) https://mindout.org.uk/get-support/mindout-online/ - [Add local/regional support groups depending on participant] LGBT+ Switchboard are a support service run by self-identifying LGBT+ people, and they can be there simply to listen, but they can also redirect you to further services. They have a phone line

	from 10am to 10pm and an email service where they'll get back to you in 72 hours, and they also have an instant messaging service. Samaritans is a general crisis helpline, and they are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Their emailing service will get back to you in 24 hours. Crisis is a texting service, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for any immediate or urgent help in a crisis. And crisis here can mean any strong emotional period, or any period where you quickly need support. MindOut runs online support for LGBT+ people every day, but their times can be changeable - the link should give you the most up-to-date information on their schedule. They also run online support groups with specific focus within the community such as trans-specific support or support for LGBT+ People of Colour.]
Goodbye	Thank you again so much for participating today! If you realise afterwards that you have any questions, or if you would like to have an update about the research process, feel free to email me. I hope you have a nice rest of your day!

Appendix II - Demographic questions

Please answer in as much or as little detail as you feel comfortable, and feel free to skip questions if you do not feel comfortable answering the question:

1. At what university/universities were you based during your LGBT+ volunteering?

2. What was your role(s) during your time as an LGBT+ volunteer?

3. How would you describe your sexuality?

4. How would you describe your gender identity?

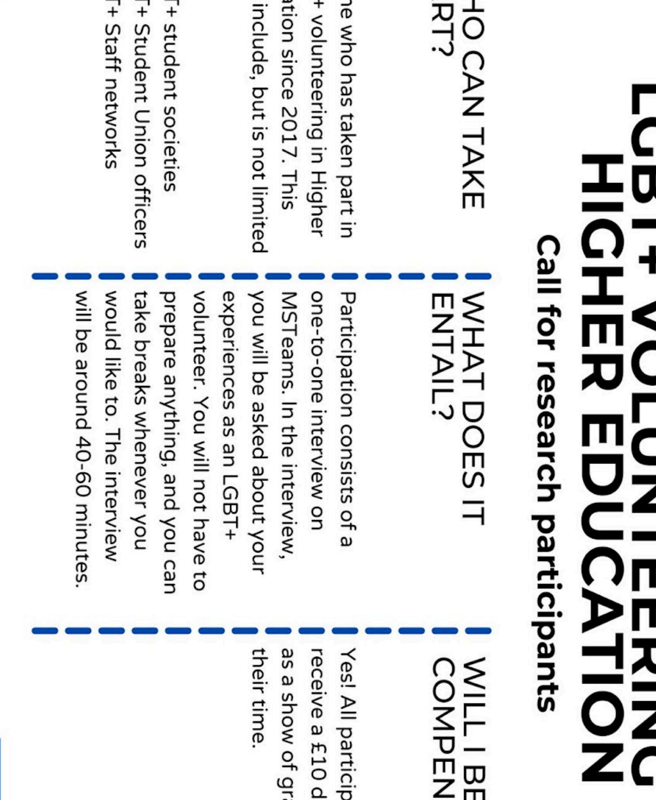
5. How would you describe your ethnicity?

6. What is your age?

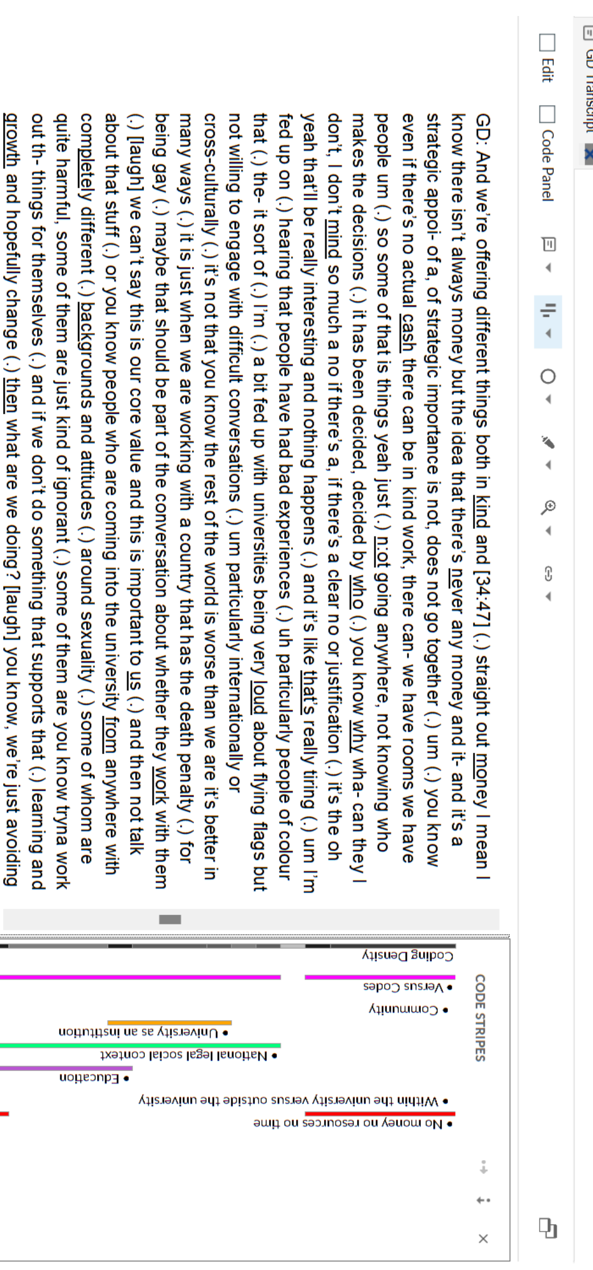
7. Which pronouns do you use?

8. Is there any other aspect of your identity that is not yet mentioned, which you feel is important to your everyday life (e.g parent, athlete, second-language speaker et cetera)?

Appendix III - Research poster



Appendix IV - Coding sample



GD Transcript

Edit Code Panel

GD: And we're offering different things both in kind and [34:47] (.) straight out money I mean I know there isn't always money but the idea that there's never any money and it- and it's a strategic appoi- of a, of strategic importance is not, does not go together (.) um (.) you know even if there's no actual cash there can be in kind work, there can- we have rooms we have people um (.) so some of that is things yeah just (.) n:ot going anywhere, not knowing who makes the decisions (.) it has been decided, decided by who (.) you know why wha- can they I don't, I don't mind so much a no if there's a, if there's a clear no or justification (.) it's the oh yeah that'll be really interesting and nothing happens (.) and it's like that's really tiring (.) um I'm fed up on (.) hearing that people have had bad experiences (.) uh particularly people of colour that (.) the- it sort of (.) I'm (.) a bit fed up with universities being very loud about flying flags but not willing to engage with difficult conversations (.) um particularly internationally or cross-culturally (.) it's not that you know the rest of the world is worse than we are it's better in many ways (.) it is just when we are working with a country that has the death penalty (.) for being gay (.) maybe that should be part of the conversation about whether they work with them (.) [laugh] we can't say this is our core value and this is important to us (.) and then not talk about that stuff (.) or you know people who are coming into the university from anywhere with completely different (.) backgrounds and attitudes (.) around sexuality (.) some of whom are quite harmful, some of them are just kind of ignorant (.) some of them are you know tryna work out th- things for themselves (.) and if we don't do something that supports that (.) learning and growth and hopefully change (.) then what are we doing? [laugh] you know, we're just avoiding

Appendix V - Focus group schedule

<table>
<tr><th>Purpose</th><th>Text</th></tr>
<tr><td>I. Introduction

Explanation of the project</td><td>Hello all, thank you for agreeing to meet me here online today! Before we start, I'll explain a bit more about how the session is going to work today. If you have any questions, or if there's anything that is unclear, just let me know.

As you will know, I am currently looking at the experiences of LGBT+ volunteers in Higher Education. In order to get a better insight into these experiences, I conducted a series of interviews with people like yourselves. I am now in the process of analysing these interviews and distilling some themes from them.

There are three reasons why I wanted to come back and do some focus group sessions. Firstly it is an opportunity to delve a bit further into these themes, and discuss them in a group setting. Secondly it is a way for me to hear responses to my early thought processes - maybe you don't agree with some of the early conclusions I have come to, or think that they need slightly more nuance, and if you do think that I would love to hear it! And lastly, I would like this meeting to also be an opportunity to share strategies and insights between you all, and maybe create some connections out of this.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Ethics</td><td>Because there are of course more people involved this time, I would like to ask that we all keep confidentiality in mind, and not share the names of people who are taking part today, or any of the conversations that take place.

[Remind people to return consent forms if they haven't already]

The session should take about an hour to an hour and a half. If at any point you would like to leave the session that's absolutely fine. Please just let me know either verbally or in the chat, so that I know it's not just technical difficulties.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Structure</td><td>The way this is going to work, is that I'll ask you all to briefly introduce yourself, and then when we've all gotten to know each other, I'll ask you a couple of questions reflecting on some of the early findings. The questions are grouped into three themes, communities, volunteering as work, and emotion. The questions are really just prompts to start off the discussion, so please don't feel like you need to answer in a particular way.

Before I start recording, does anyone have any questions?</td></tr>
</table>

	START RECORDING
II. Body Introduction + icebreaker	Could you just say your name, what your volunteering role is or was, you can name your pronouns if you want to, and how you would define "LGBT+ community"? Would anyone like to go first? [Ask to nominate the next person to speak]
Communities	The first thing I would like to discuss is how we see ourselves community-wise. 1. What do you think the most important role of LGBT+ communities at university is? 2. A recurring theme seems to be around student and staff communities providing resources or connections that volunteers didn't have themselves when they were younger. What kinds of things do you think you would have benefited from? 3. Some people mentioned tensions within their LGBT+ communities, or within LGBT+ communities more broadly, impacted their work. Have any LGBT+ specific tensions arisen in your work? What is the most pressing of these tensions? How do you respond to these tensions? 4. Some people mentioned the need to be approachable and engaging, or the need to prevent other LGBT+ people feeling isolated. What are some ways to encourage this approachability? What makes/made you feel isolated? 5. Ties to local communities, charities, or other LGBT+ communities in Higher Education seemed to be important to many people, although some people found it difficult to create or maintain these ties. How do you try to connect to other communities?

Volunteering work	The next set of questions are all about the work that we do as volunteers, and how we do it. 1. To what extent do you see your volunteering work as work? In what ways do you think it is different or similar to non-voluntary work? 2. Recognition for the volunteering that was being done, was seen as an important factor in being able to do volunteering successfully or comfortably. To what extent do you feel that volunteers' effort is being recognised? What would be a good way to recognise the work that volunteers do? 3. What, to you, are indicators that universities are supporting the efforts of LGBT+ volunteers? What are indicators that universities are not supportive? 4. Some people felt that the volunteering work was not evenly distributed, and experienced frustration at taking on a lot of work, or experienced guilt for not taking on enough work. What do you think could be a good way to divide up tasks? 5. What are the main hurdles to doing your volunteering? What are the main factors enabling you to do your volunteering comfortably?
Emotion	Lastly, I want to look at the emotional side of volunteering. 1. What are some of the key emotions that you associate with volunteering? Why these emotions? 2. Many volunteers struggled with disappointment or frustration related to low rates of interest or participation in events. How do you deal with low turnout or events that aren't as successful as you'd hoped? 3. Many people cited personal growth, development and education as benefits of being a volunteer. What do you think has been the biggest factor contributing to your personal development? [What makes for a good environment to develop in?] 4. (Closing question) What is/was the thing that kept you going in your volunteer work?

III. Outro Transition to ending	That was the last question! Are there any other topics that are important to LGBT+ volunteering, that we haven't spoken about yet?
Thanks and further information	Thank you again so much for participating today! I will stop the recording now. Are you alright? Do you have any questions? [if participants are clearly upset or worried, immediately skip to signposting] As with the interviews, you should receive the 10 pound voucher via email over the next few days, but just be aware that it might end up in your Spam folder. If you haven't received it within three days, just let me know and I'll make sure that that's all fine. I will also circulate a document where people can leave their contact details, if there is someone that you would like to stay in touch with to maybe collaborate with, or exchange more ideas. Just because at in-person focus groups, there might have been more scope for exchanging socials or email addresses. This is completely voluntary of course, which is also why I'm circulating it afterwards - I don't want anyone to feel pressure to leave contact details.
Signposting	Lastly, just before we end the call, I'm just going to leave you with a couple of resources. Sometimes talking about these things can be a bit difficult, or can have a big emotional impact, so I'm just going to paste a couple of resources into the chat, and go through them. And even if you don't think you'll use them yourself, it might be helpful for someone you know: [- **LGBT+ Switchboard** (phone 0300 330 0630, email chris@switchboard.lgbt) https://switchboard.lgbt/how-we-can-help - **Samaritans** (phone 116 123, email jo@samaritans.org) https://www.samaritans.org/ - **Crisis** (text HOME to 741741) https://www.crisistextline.org/ - **MindOut** (online support service) https://mindout.org.uk/get-support/mindout-online/ - [Add local/regional support groups depending on participant] LGBT+ Switchboard are a support service run by self-identifying LGBT+ people, and they can be there simply to listen, but they can also redirect you to further services. They have a phone line from 10am to 10pm and an email service where they'll get back to you in 72 hours, and they also have an instant messaging service.

	Samaritans is a general crisis helpline, and they are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Their emailing service will get back to you in 24 hours. Crisis is a texting service, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for any immediate or urgent help in a crisis. And crisis here can mean any strong emotional period, or any period where you quickly need support. MindOut runs online support for LGBT+ people every day, but their times can be changeable - the link should give you the most up-to-date information on their schedule. They also run online support groups with specific focus within the community such as trans-specific support or support for LGBT+ People of Colour.]
Goodbye	Thank you again so much for participating today! If you realise afterwards that you have any questions, or if you would like to have an update about the research process, feel free to email me. I hope you have a nice rest of your day!