“I can’t stop being an activist”:
study on mediated activism and social change in Belarusian LGBT+ community

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Abstract

During the last five years mediated activism dedicated to LGBT+ issues in Belarus has flourished despite restrictive context: several new online initiatives, including a media project, have been launched. The current study investigates how one of the most politically underprivileged and marginalized groups – LGBT+ activists – make use of online social media to advocate for positive social and political modification in the Belarusian society. By collecting interviews with activists as a primary source of lived experiences, applying thematical analysis on the data from 13 interviews, and then contributing with netnography-informed content analysis as an instrument to analyse 34 posts written in February of 2018 on the personal Facebook pages of the same activists, the current research examines patterns of experiences surrounding participation in mediated LGBT+ activism. The power dynamics and the influence of the repressive context on the practices of mediated activism are analysed through feminist critical discourse analysis with specific focus on heteronormativity as a key-concept of imposing power on marginalized identities.

Four global themes emerged in the result of the analysis: 1) heteronormativity and state control; 2) identity as “doing”; 3) the “other” activism, and 4) social change as individual transformation. Topics of heteronormativity, homophobia, hate-crime and violence turned out to be most present in the posts produced by the activists. It was found that in the restrictive spaces mediated activism and social media, instead of serving as tools for mass outreach and mobilization, endanger activists engaged in LGBT+ issues. Burnout, risk of poverty, emotional and physical assaults, and exposure to social sanctions are happening to activists because of their presence online, and there are extremely limited tools to combat these consequences of publicity. In Belarusian context, the shrinking space for civil society and limited political opportunities outweigh the potential of online social media, lower their impact and determine prospects of social change in such a way, when viral organizing or structural transformations become extremely limited.

Key-words: mediated activism; LGBT+ activism; collective/connective action; social media; Belarus.

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1. Introduction and background

Last decade has been a fruitful soil for scholars engaged in studies of online social networks. With increasing attention, the academic and activist communities have been drawn to investigate massive protests around the globe, such as Occupy Wallstreet, Arab Spring and Women’s March. Those social gatherings organized and empowered with the help of online social media have ignited rigorous debates around the nature and potential of activism that heavily relies on interconnectivity and collective action practiced and performed in ways that have never been implemented before.

These debates mostly have been held from two perspectives. On one side, one can find scholars who have thoroughly argued in favour of the capacity of online social media to serve to the public good and empower activists to mobilize communities, spread horizontal education and strengthen their advocacy actions globally. This camp of media optimists that includes prominent researchers coming from various fields – from political economy to popular culture, – have been vocal on issues of cosmopolitism and connectivity as a means of peace and capacity building for marginalized movements (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010; Silverstone, 2002). One the other side, one can find scholars who are grounded in studies of power and are more focused on critical accounts of mediated activism, its diffused, organizationally weak structures. These researchers have been relentlessly working with addressing matters of economics and politics and their immense influence on the way the online social media are used by numerous actors. Talking about data manipulation, surveillance and persecution, these scholars have been promoting a more sceptical outlook on connectivity and argued for more in-depth analysis of social movements in mediated spaces (Hjarvard, 2008; Livingstone, 2009; Dolata & Schrape, 2016).

The current research emerges right on the nexus of this polemics from curiosity to learn whether mediated activism and online social media platforms play any role in transition to more pluralistic, inclusive, and diverse societies in closed political systems with limited options of political participation, and if so, how their potential is used by activists from marginalized groups. This study is designed to investigate how one of the most politically underprivileged and marginalized groups – LGBT+ activists – make use of online social media to advocate for social change and positive social and political modification in the Belarusian society. However, to fully understand the meaning and the reasoning of using online social media in Belarus, one has to introduce the socio-political context first.

Mediated activism never happens in detached, secluded online spaces that do not relate to any physical reality. In fact, the way mediated activism is practiced is very much determined by
politics outside of the online spaces, and it intersects with power, ideology, labour on local, national, and international level. For Burkart and Christensen, by using such a geopolitical outlook on activism, one opens a door for a broader, more comprehensive picture of the dynamics happening within mediated political practices, as it allows to tackle questions of influence, political possibilities and repressions (Burkart & Christensen, 2013).

In the case of Belarus, several notable features should be taken into the account. One of the major political events that has divided the history of mediated activism called “Ploscha” (The Square) which happened in 2010 still plays a huge role when it comes to civil organizing and advocacy. Ploscha that was virally organized after the re-election of Alexander Lukasheko as the president was instantly repressed by brutal military force, and since then, there has been only one successful attempt in March 2017 to mobilize people for mass protesting; this time – against “tax on parasites” (this protest, however, was also ruthlessly suppressed by the police and the army). Together with that, during the last five years, multiple actors in the civil society sector in Belarus have reported the gradual, but noticeable trend of shrinking civil space for their activities (USAID Bureau for Europe and Eurasia, 2016). While confrontation with the government has always been a part of struggle for many non-governmental organizations, with the shut down of major independent media and parallel increase in pro-Russian outlets, the situation became worse. In the centre of all these rather negative processes, one specific trend still gives hope. The increased participation of the millennials, young people born between 1980s and 2000s, in social change via social media is a process that attracts a lot of attention in Belarus.

Participation in progressive social change and calling for justice, equality and respect with the help of social media – activities typically recognized as mediated activism – are not brand-new trends. Activism has been of interest to many researchers across the world, who were systematically examining both personal and institutional aspects of it in the global North, introducing arguments both for its innovative and fluid character, and for its shallow participation in more rooted political structures. Yet, the same trend in other locations of the world in many cases hasn’t been investigated. The reasons for that often lie in the realm of political and social challenges. Though during recent years Belarus has improved its regulations regarding visa regime, the country still appears to be closed to the foreigners, and the production of the knowledge which directly address the current power situation is rarely possible inside the country. The language barrier and the security issues are not the last in the list of the obstacles for conducting a study that focuses on activity that may lead to prosecution and imprisonment.

Belarus is quite unique, when it comes to mediated activism: Belarusian millennials are the generation has never experienced alteration in presidency or any transformation of the
government. While Belarus has ratified several broad conventions against the discrimination, LGBT+ rights are unrecognized as a part of the current political course, and there is no political will to promote this topic further (USAID Bureau for Europe and Eurasia, 2016). In the context where civil initiatives are not welcomed, situations of social injustice are neglected, and the space for political engagement is constantly shrinking, bloom in activism dedicated to highly charged social topics, such as LGBT+ issues, appeared to be rather an unexpected turn. During last five years, mediated activism dedicated to LGBT+ has flourished: several new online initiatives, including a media project have been launched. And the question is then, what has inspired young people to take a stance and become engaged in struggle for social change?

1.1. Research Problem and Expected Outcome

To have a more nuanced comprehension of what role mediated activism plays in politically closed systems and whether it makes any change for activists on the ground, it is essential to gather first-hand information regarding experiences connected with this matter. Having access to the country and the privilege to be in touch with local LGBT+ activists, I set the ambition of the current research to provide insights both about personal and social dimensions of online LGBT+ activism in Belarus and to introduce an analysis of power dynamics where struggles for social change take place. The research is designed to investigate the reasons that motivate young people to participate in mediated forms of activism regarding LGBT+ rights, their strategies of using online social media for advocacy and their perception of the social change that should be achieved with these actions.

Being a feminist and queer activist myself, I firmly believe that to strengthen activist practices, to build a sustainable and consistent activist movement, and to involve more citizens, we need more data about what is happening in mediated spaces and what challenges are faced by the activists. By learning first-hand experiences and analysing written public texts that constitute practices of activism, the current research will strive to provide with a corpus of knowledge that may be used for further development of the movement by various actors in the civil society and in the academia.

1.2. Methods and Materials

To fulfil the aspiration of the study to analyse different dimensions of mediated activism and the power dynamics therein, three research questions with specific focus on activists themselves, their places in the power structure, and their activities have been designed.
RQ 1: *In what terms do LGBT+ activists define their identities as activists and to what extent mediated activism inform these identities?*

RQ 1 is aimed to learn how LGBT+ activists define their engagement in activism, its mediated forms, and how they see their identities in connection to it. As such identification imposes both physical and emotional threat to the individuals, RQ 1 is drafted to understand hidden processes under adoption of marginalized identities, learn personal stories of becoming, spot matching themes and patterns, and focus on how mediated activism influences or informs these identities. The current research question is built upon intersectional theory that will put the “activists’” identities into a multilayer perspective in order to identify other categories that support or challenge feelings of belonging and to spot oppressive structures that prevent or facilitate processes of identification (Crenshaw, 1989). Queer theory will be also used to explore what place practices of non-identification and nomadism have in experiences of LGBT+ individuals, when it comes to double marginalization of being both social and politically ostracized. The notion of collective/connected action will help to place the experience of being an activist into the wider context of communal and group actions and will help to discern patterns that either help or prevent activists from organizing into communities or movements (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013).

RQ 2: *What are the kinds of social change LGBT+ activists are trying to achieve with the help of mediated activism?*

As young LGBT+ activists in Belarus have never been exposed to open political structures inside the country, RQ 2 is aimed to learn how in the conditions of shrinking civil space and extremely limited opportunities of political participation LGBT+ activists imagine the social change that they would like to see happening because of their actions. The research question will also provide with an insight of how LGBT+ activists imagine political and power structures and how they envision their position therein. RQ 2 expands on the notion of the structure of political opportunities to highlight internalized oppressions and hegemonic power discourses that may be present in thinking about the social change presented by the activists (Mark & McAdam, 1999; Foucault, 1980; Lazar, 2005).

RQ 3: *What venues, activities and methods constitute mediated activism practiced by LGBT+ activists?*

RQ 3 is designed to explore platforms and written texts on personal pages of the activists to spot most prominent themes there and elaborate which strategies and tools are employed by the activists to advocate for social change.

Two specific focus areas of the research questions – the activists themselves and their produced texts – have led to use mixed methods regarding collection and analysis of the data. By
using interviews with activists as a primary source of lived experiences, applying thematical analysis on the collected data from 13 interviews, and then contributing with netnography-informed content analysis as an instrument to analyse 34 posts written in February of 2018 on the personal Facebook pages of the same activists, the research intends to investigate patterns of experiences surrounding participation in mediated LGBT+ activism and shed light on topics that are prevailing in the realm of personal/political activism. While thematic analysis will serve as a navigation instrument for the interview data, netnography will be used as a complimentary tool to examine written texts for a more detailed picture of what is said in the mediated spaced and how is it discussed.

The power dynamics is going to be analysed with the help of the feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) applied to the interview materials as a part of thematic analysis. Using Lazar’s (2005) framework of feminist perspective on discourse and Ahmed’s (2006) take on heteronormativity as a discursive practice, I will examine the narratives of the activists to understand to what extent repressive context influences the forms of mediated activism and actual actions taken to sabotage this context (Ahmed, 2006; Lazar, 2005).

By applying these methods together, I hope not only to understand the lived-through experiences, but to write these experiences into a broader political and social context, and to highlight how marginalization is connected with activism.

2. Theory and Key Concepts

2.1. Theoretical Considerations

To discuss matters of activism, resistance, identity and power, one needs to find an analytical stance that helps to excavate those issues from vast stratum of socio-cultural context around mediated LGBT+ activism in Belarus. To acquire precision and depth in such analysis, two theoretical optics are implemented in the current study: queer theory and intersectionality. While one might argue that queer and intersectionality do not match well, as one radically rejects the identity and the other is focusing on its presence, the empirical data have shown that this quite bipolar dynamic is present in the experiences of activists of being and not being at the same time. Thus, this study will try to combine these perspectives to illuminate complexity of participation in mediated activism for LGBT+ activists and their tangled relations with the notion of activist identities.

In the context of restrictive spaces, where neither gender studies nor gay or lesbian studies have never been a part of recognized academic field or public discussion, LGBT+ identities paradoxically become a queer project themselves. As Buyantueva writes, rather than
deconstructing the notion of identity, the LGBT+ community in Russia for the last decade has been trying to find a common ground and mobilize its members on the basis of shared identities (Buyantueva, 2018). Curiously, these “shared identities” rarely include normative categories or any distinct social or cultural coordinates – rather by shared identities activists mean some undefined, unlabelled experience of being marginalized, segregated and oppressed. While such strategy of mobilization obviously has its advantages of including people who may not solidarize with specific groups in LGBT+ community, but may solidarize with the theme of injustice, it is still a question of interest how these experiences of marginalization are displayed for political struggle, what meanings are put into these formations and how activists make sense of them. On the other hand, Steryna points out in her research on self-narratives of LGBT+ people and their attitudes toward LGBT+ activism, though this strategy of communal experiences might be relevant for LGBT+ groups in the capital, members of LGBT+ community in the regions are still very connected to the personal identities as gay, lesbian or bisexual and they build their relations with activism based precisely on these identities (Steryna, 2017).

To tackle this quite bipolar dynamic: of being named and not named, of being defined and undefined, – I will investigate how queer – as a category that deconstructs the heterosexual norm and combats it by refusing to be labelled – sabotages heteronormative structures. Together with that, I will attentively study how and why people manifest some non-normative identities and mobilize them for their political purposes connected with sexuality and civil rights. In such a way, a richer and more complex analysis balancing between recognition of identities and unlabelled experiences will be produced.

2.1.1. Queer theory

Queer theory has always been one of the most discussed analytical frames, not in the last place because of its radical stance toward the nature of identity and sexuality (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2006). The key idea behind queer as a concept is its critical accounts of portrayal of sexuality as something inherent or natural and prescribing heterosexuality as a norm. Building on Butler’s theory of performativity and Foucault’s works on processes of institutionalization of sexuality, theorists engaged in queer studies highlight constructivist character of labelling of sexual behaviour into categories of normality and argue in favour of resisting ideological structures that put heteronormativity at the top of the hierarchy (Butler, 2006; Foucault, 1990). Heteronormativity usually is unpacked as a set of norms that define not only the sexual behaviour, but also gendered behaviour, and prescribe only certain sexual practices as a norm (Ahmed, 2006).
Within this line of thinking, queer is often broadly defined as resistance toward normativity that celebrates rejection of labelling and aims to destabilize the heteronormative status quo by mismatching, misbehaving and exceeding prescribed elements of gender, sexuality and identity. As queer theory is a theoretical optics that is differently used and operationalized by scholars depending on their political views, it is crucial to discuss two implications of queer theory that will influence the analysis in the current study.

First implication is the implication of the nature of identity. As it was mentioned above, queer theory approaches identity as a process of construction and performance; not being, but becoming (Butler, 1988; Hall, 1989). Thus, in the current research by talking about identities with LGBT+ people I will try to trace processes of how these identities were formed and employed and what influences on individual choice to adopt and mobilize certain identities, though they provoke social sanctions. To illuminate tension within heteronormative discourse, I will also investigate what identities are left out when LGBT+ activists practice activism in mediated forms and why it is important to claim an identity rather than radically reject the whole discourse of identity politics in the first place.

Second implication is the implication of resistance to normativity. Existence in heteronormativity for LGBT+ individuals is mashed with marginalization, silencing and tabooing. Thus, the very fact of not belonging to heteronormative order and openly manifesting it is a fact of political resistance that implies mobilization of the whole apparatus of punishment. By participating in other political activities, such as mediated activism, LGBT+ people become even more targeted for their actions and suffer both from political and social oppression. To examine this connection between personal and political persecution and to deconstruct mechanisms that imply it, special emphasis on matters of personal well-being and security will be put during the study.

2.1.2. Intersectionality

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework is a vital component of any study that deals with interinfluence of socio-political identities. The term intersectionality was originally coined in 1991 by Kimberle Crenshaw, US-based feminist theorist working with issues of race and gender. By introducing the term, Crenshaw aimed to capture a specific position of women of colour at the intersection of race and gender and to highlight how both feminist and antiracist undertakings were contributing to marginalization of the issues faced by women of colour (Crenshaw, 1991, p.359).

During the last decade, however, the term was expanded to include more categories, such as class, sexuality, (dis)ability and many others to address the complexity of power structures around
processes of designing, adopting, rejecting and living through identities. A key-feature of intersectional theory is its comprehension of multiple identities as inseparable, as being acted and lived entangled: one cannot dissect or separate experience of being oppressed only as a woman from experience of being oppressed as a woman of colour (Bowleg, 2008). Intersectionality emphasises the interdependency of identities and rather than portraying people who experience multilayer oppression as victims, it empowers them to combat social order that produces oppressive power structures.

To address holistically structural alterations between people, intersectionality serves a multi-dimensional approach which examined how systems of inequality impact individuals both on personal and institutional levels and how these systems intersect (Barnum & Zajicek, 2008; Hancock, 2007). As Darvishpour puts it, intersectionality as a concept facilitates the examination of how power relations and imbalances influence on people and their status in society (Darvishpour, 2013). In other words, intersectionality not only helps to understand why people adopt and perform some identities, but it also links these processes to institutional practices.

One might argue that intersectionality as a theory of identities might not be that relevant for the research on mediates activism, but the usage of online media doesn’t come from some imaginative space that has no connection to socio-cultural context. As it was revealed in the empirical data, the way LGBT+ people, or people of any other groups, use the online media, the choice of topics they discuss, the tools they use to promote those topics – this whole spectre of issues is connected to their socio-cultural experience of living in a specific context and identities they perform in that context. To put it bluntly, financially independent open bisexual person from the capital may have more freedom in expressing their attitudes toward LGBT+ matters than a transgender person living in a small community in a regional town with limited job market.

Another essential part of implementing intersectional theory in the study is understanding of identity not as a monolith, static construction, but as fluid, always changing entity that goes through transformation of becoming (Hancock, 2007; Hall, 1989). Thought the notion of identity and its implications are going to be discussed further, it is important to underline from the beginning that this study comes from socio-constructivist background and emphasizes the dependency of a given identity on a certain context that gives meaning to this identity (Burr, 1995). Socio-constructivist perspective doesn’t in any way deny that the category of identity is still meaningful for the people who adopt it; quite the opposite, it helps to underline how the meaning of identity relates to its context, how it is produced and reproduced there.
2.2. Key Concepts

To unpack and support theoretical frames for the study, five terms covering several individual and institutional aspects of engagement in mediated activism: identity, collective/connective actions, mediated activism, structure of political opportunities, and shrinking civil society space – will be discussed. This discussion will touch upon how these terms are informed by queer and intersectional theories and how they interconnect with each other.

Though this list of terms could have been expanded to include concepts related to mechanisms of control and emphasize matters of surveillance, discrimination and oppression even further, during the preparation phase for this research these concepts turned out to be an inherit part of the discussion of identities and mediated activism. Thus, while they won’t be examined separately, they will be introduced along other terms to scrutinize certain aspects of experiences connected with the mentioned practices of political resistance.

2.2.1. Identity

For the last decade practices of mediated activism have been discussed from the point of personal and communal identities not only by those researchers who have praised mediated forms of political actions for their potential to serve for positive social change, but also by those who were more sceptical toward it (for media optimism see Silverstone, 2002; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010; for media scepticism see Morozov, 2011; Lindren, 2013). Such attention to the issue is not spontaneous: the matter of identity, its relation to collective action and exploration whether it can predict participation in political resistance are crucial questions that lie at the core of inquiries into activism.

To start with, one of the simplest ways to define identity is to explain it as a sense of belonging to a specific social group, rehearsed, exercised and performed through specific set of self-narratives and repertoire of practices (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Identity, while being built upon a certain carcass of social repertoires, is never static in it – one rather accumulates practices and tools to claim an identity, to become and perform a self and to transform that performance in changing environment (Hall, 1989). This acquisition of a practiced self can be extended beyond identities that are traditionally implied by such a statement – woman or man, cis or trans – to cover more “ politicized” performances as well, such as activist one.

As Postmes and van Zomeren put it, social identity is a core component of social action that can’t be neglected: building on social identity theory, they argue that conscious belonging to a group supported by inner claim of a certain identity, improves and strengthens involvement into the agenda of the group and helps to facilitate engagement in its social activities (Tajfel & Turner,
What is especially interesting in this line of argumentation is the suggestion that belonging to a group with stable, legitimate and permanent bounds directs people to redefine their identities from ones that are formed by social circumstances only into more agentic ones. These agentic, or “politicized”, selves might not be necessarily involved into advocacy actions for the group. But, as agreed by many researchers, people who have personal connection with a topic of social action tend to provide with both social and financial support to the matter, while lack of that connection typically doesn’t lead further initial point of recruitment (Lewis and others, 2014; Potts and others, 2014). Strumer and Simon developed this thinking further by adding that politicized identities which belong to a group from which exit is impossible, such as ethnic groups or LGBT+, go hand in hand with participation in the social action, as people with these identities retreat to political struggle to improve their social situation, unable to leave (Strumer & Simon, 2004).

While this discussion may serve as a general overview of thinking connected with politicized identities, it is important to tackle some of assumptions inside this logic. First, it is assumed that people who experience structural oppression due to their belonging to a group, have a political opportunity to engage in social action that may lead to a positive change, which is mostly not the case for repressive contexts and would be discussed further in this chapter. Secondly, it is assumed that people who experience discrimination even if they can participate in social action, would retreat to it as an instrument of change. Coming to online social media and the Internet, Byantueva highlights, that increased presence of LGBT+ people online in the late 2000s didn’t imply increased presence of LGBT+ issues as a part of political discussions, nor it implied increased participation in any forms of activism (Byantueva, 2018). Most of community members were engaged in getting-to-know each other activities and leisure. Thus, membership in structurally oppressed group doesn’t necessarily bring activism as a part of that identity: i.e. being a transgender person doesn’t automatically make one a trans*activist, - and there are other forces that come into interplay of reasoning to become an activist. Thirdly, and most importantly, it is implied that social action or activism is a safe, legitimate and non-sanctioned way of advocacy for a group that experiences discrimination. Activism from structurally disadvantaged groups is commonly challenged by the resistance from other more powerful actors, and because of that outer pressure the formation of shared activist identity may be hindered (Postmes & Van Zomeren, 2008). In the context where both LGBT+ identities and activist identities are seen as threats, people who belong to these groups might feel extremely resistant toward claiming those identities and publicly speaking of them. Adopting an identity, whether it is an identity of a queer activist or a lesbian woman, means putting oneself in a discourse with predisposed power dynamics not in the
favour of person, and for people who are already exposed to oppression this might be least favourable course of action.

Here, it also comes into interplay that the “activist” identity anchors in the same process of learning repertoires of actions and identifying them as “activist” action, as it does with identity of woman or man, or national identity. In other words, if a person belongs to a context where there are few or no examples identified in political sphere as activism and there are few people claiming such an identity, the reclaiming of identity is extremely problematic, because the set of suggested actions and performances is limited. Being an activist in a repressive environment might entangle a huge social and political pressure and, thus, it puts in the centre those types of activist actions that have provoked brutal backlash and repressions, and other actions might seem insufficient enough to be labelled as activism. It also might be the case that activists would nomad between different identities and labels, if they encounter strong opposition to them. As Braidotti put it, nomadism as a practice of slipping between categories, of non-defining a self, of travelling from one label to another might be a political decision taken in a situation where full adoption or performance of a self is impossible (Braidotti, 2011).

Such dynamics and trend to divide between political activism and other types of social actions can be traced in the Russian-speaking feminist online communities as well. Though opinion leaders of the community might be engaged in education, social and cultural issues, promoting values of equality, they may be very hesitant to claim identity of an activist by themselves, and yet, may accept such identity if given by other people (Snizhko, 2016). While, of course, a lot in this instance deals with the matters of practiced civil resistance and politics and lack of social practice to recognize activism in positive terms, it might also be a matter of female socialization in Russian-speaking contexts: as noted by Solomatina and Schmidt, women tend to alienate the results of their work and mobilize their group identity to speak in terms of “we” (we as women, not we as activists) to talk about their personal political achievements (Solomatina & Schmidt, 2015).

With this said, it is then important to continue the discussion about actual participation in activism and dive into the question of collective and connective actions.

2.2.2. Collective/Connective Action

The classic notion of collective action as activities that are directed “at removing the perceived underlying causes of group’s disadvantage or problem” provided by Wright and others, has been negotiated, revisited and theorized during the last several decades, and, yet, it has managed to sustain its status, and it is still widely used to capture the essence of group efforts.
invested into social resistance (Wright and others, 1990). Collective action as a theory heavily relies on the concept of group identity, and, if simplified, may be explained as perception that “if people have the same interests, they will act collectively to achieve them” (Sandoval-Almazan and others, 2014). It suggests a model where people who are exposed to the same injustice and share the same perceived efficacy, form a common group identity that allow them to participate in the collective action (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002). One of the important underlying assumption here is that people with the same problems will try to find supporters and eventually form more organized and formalized structures that will amplify their efforts.

The logic of collective action has been developed by several scholars, including Kotler (1979), Tarrow (1994), and Olson (1971), to examine structures of social movements that emerge from joint efforts and to avoid idealization or simplification of them. Tarrow, for example, has suggested four properties that define social movements as collective action which are collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction; as one can observe, a lot here is defined by shared understanding and recognition (Tarrow, 1994). And while collective action theory has been widely acknowledged and applied to explain social actions connected with activism, it has left several questions unanswered. First, as it was mentioned before, the theory is based on the idea that collective action leads to centralization and institutionalization that result in establishing organizations and formal initiative to advocate for a specific issue and to engage more individuals. For the collective action theory, the stage of formalizing or organizing cannot be missed out: it is an essential step in the development of the movement. Secondly, it implies that people have access to physical public spaces where they can exercise their political will, and, thus, have face-to-face communication that strengthens group identity. And thirdly, collective action depends mainly on face-to-face communication or communication that is physically mediated. The question is, what happens if the social action takes places in a context where formation of group identity is hindered, or people are not inclined to form it, and the context that is resistant to civil organizing becomes highly saturated with digital technologies?

To answer this inquiry, Bennett & Segerberg suggests introducing the notion of “individualized publics” to open discussion about new formation of individuals who are, though being exposed to injustice, may not join political or social institutions, may feel reluctant to joining social movements and rather than seeking common group justice, they may in the first place be more interested in their own beliefs and personal needs (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). To analyse engagement of individualized publics, they argue to focus not on the action – as in collective action theory – but on digital communication as an organizing principle. Indeed, with the development of digital communication and increased presence of online social media, the character of social
action has changed, and practices associated with it have undergone through some modifications. As Earl & Kimport (2011) puts it, online social media have two primary effect on social action: they drastically reduce costs of participation and assist in aggregation of individualized actions into a broader collective frame. The reduced costs of participation also could be understood as a possibility to surpass the stage of formalization: while in the collective action theory organizing is essential for gaining resources, within online social media such organizing can be left out and other forms of togetherness might be implemented. The concept of “organized formality” unpacked by Dobusch and Quack (2011) as explicit sets of rules that helps to establish some level of togetherness within online communities may be helpful to understand that while the structures have been modified, that haven’t been abandoned completely.

Bennet and Segerberg (2013) point exactly at this aspect, when they speak about how digitalization affects social action. By introducing three types of action networks: organizationally brokered, organizationally enabled, and crowd enabled – they strive to tackle upon the issue of modified communication and transformed models of social action. By introducing organizationally brokered and organizationally enabled type of action, they investigated those types of action that have at least some organized coordination. The third type of action network, crowd-enable one, is usually praised more than others for its independency from formal structures and ability to engage common individuals. It is defined as a network of individuals who “employ mix of personal digital media and face-to-face interaction to create a coherent structure” to advocate for social change (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013, p. 15).

Here it is crucial not to overestimate the significance of the online social media: indeed, some changes are happening to the structures of movements, loosening them and providing with less formalized opportunities to engage. However, while some researchers argue that online social media enable crowds to participate in political processes and to vocalize their needs without obstruction, unfortunately, not that many evidences for this statement can be found in repressive contexts (McCaugley and Ayers, 2003; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010).

A valuable example can be brought by two social movements, not primary connected with LGBT+ issues, but vividly highlighting and critiquing assumption that the increased presence of online media implies social change: #metoo and #янебоюсьсказать (#iamnotafraidtotell). The #metoo movement mostly supported in English speaking Western democracies has not only engaged thousands of followers into public protests and manifestations, but also ignited series of investigations connected with harassment, rape and violence, prosecution on these cases and political debates around the issue. The #янебоюсьсказать movement though being even more popular in Russian-speaking restrictive spaces didn’t lead to any actual structural social change.
Thought the topic of violence and harassment indeed became less tabooed, the movement stayed within Facebook and VK social networks and didn’t influence on political processes. One might speculate about the reasons behind such drastic gap between massive participation and lack of social change in Russian-speaking countries, as no research are available on the matter, but this trend of rapid, massive engagement in the issue and then lack of political response or lack of political power to implement change is something that is highly relevant for LGBT+ community and its activism as well.

In other words, neither the presence of online social media, nor later mobilization can predict the political influence of the social action. To proceed further with the discussion of connective action and its variations in political contexts, mediated activism will be discussed as a specific form of connective action.

2.2.3. Mediated activism

The term activism itself has been negotiated for many years, and one of the major question around it was whether the term should be as open as possible to capture variety of practiced social actions or it should be narrowed down to define concrete examples of civil resistance. While some researchers have been trying to introduce elements of activism (Kotler, 1979), extract its stages (Sandal-Almazan and others, 2014), pinpoint variances between activism practiced by different social groups (Dolata & Schrape, 2016), the others have been calling for less structural approach that would contribute to understanding more general tendencies in activism and capture its complexity (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010; Potts and others, 2014; Mehrabov, 2017). For vibrant civil societies with multiply actors and stakeholders engaged in activist practices, structuralized approach with pre-defined definitions of activist practices might be a sharp analytical tool, however, for restrictive contexts it might appear to be a non-applicable instrument that doesn’t capture processes happening in the society. To provide with space for non-labelled and non-organized practices that also could contribute to social change, the current study is more inclined to follow the steps of the researchers from the second group and escape from narrowed definitions. In the current work the term activism would be understood as any social action that is directed toward positive social change regarding equality, non-discrimination, justice, and human rights.

During the recent decades increased participation in activism in restrictive contexts and low, but steady growth in the amount of people in the online social media engaged in the social justice issues have been a field of exploration, examination, and analysis. While media optimists, such as Van Laer & Van Aelst or Silverstone, have been writing that the Internet has given protest transnational character, and it has significantly facilitated cosmopolitan mobilization, media
sceptics, including Morozov, Lindren, and Bimber, have been highlighting issues of media dependency, insufficient movement structures, and lack of control over content created in the social media (Silverstone, 2002; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Lindren, 2013; Bimber, 2017). From these debates, the notion of mediated activism arose to describe those types of activism that are more connected with virtual spaces, rather than physical ones. Some researchers make a clear distinction between mediated and mediatised forms of activism, where the former is defined as traditional face-to-face activism that recruit technologies to facilitate the process of engagement (Gerbaudo, 2014). Here, it is important that the recruited technologies are either created by the activists themselves, or they are used to create new media products such as websites, applications, or platforms. The mediatised form of activism, then, is understood as activism that is practiced on corporate online social media where activists are alienated from technological structures and are mostly engaged in creating content for these online social networks.

As this study deals precisely with activism rooted in online social media, it might seem more appropriate in this instance to employ the term “mediatised activism” to capture specific practices connected with online spaces, but then it would mean erasing the actual complexity of how LGBT+ activists in Belarus exercise activism. Though it might seem that one can easily distinguish between “online” and “offline” actions and trace on which platforms activists produce their content, in practice activists can nomad between social networks, websites, and even email newsletters. Due to extremely small number of activists and very limited institutionalized structures (in 2018, only four organizations are operating in the country), people who have engaged in one form of activism inevitably end up being engaged in all its possible forms to different extents. While primary activity of a person might be writing articles or promoting organization online, the person might gradually become involved in organizing “offline” events or managing projects, together with having several other official jobs. The term “mediatised activism” assumes that there is an actual gap between virtual and factual, between face-to-face activism and its online modifications that can be established. But as pointed out by many and observed in cases of activists, we no longer live “in” one place, we don’t inhabit only physical locations: because of the mediation and interconnection, we inhabit multiply “elsewhere” in every given second, and, thus, the question about offline vs online is not even a valid one, as we are constantly both “offline” (being physically present somewhere) and “online” (being present in virtual locations) (Morley, 2017).

Together with that, the very usage of online media spaces poses a question of agency. Whereas the term “mediated activism” is typically used to describe activists as main agents who
consciously engage in social resistance, “mediatized activism” as a concept has a peculiar side of bringing the agency of online social media to the discussion. A fruitful insight to the matter can be provided by the actor-network theory arguing that technology, and online social media in this specific case, has its own logic that predetermines horizon of free actions, and has its own agency that influences on the results of taken actions (Spöhrer & Ochsner, 2017). Changing nature of Facebook algorithms that defines what type of news people see in their feeds, how they can relate to the posts, and what pages are available to them supports this idea that not only the activists, but the platforms play their parts in the process of mediation.

The conceptual dilemma for this study is whether to go with a term which is sensitive to the issue of how activists use other tools to advocate for their agenda on the transgressive state of virtual and factual or to choose a term that is considerate regarding agency of online social media but gives more attention to the process of interaction between activists and the media. To avoid confusion, the term mediated activism will be used to talk about variety of these experiences connected with creation of independent platforms, such as websites, in some instances, and then relying heavily on online social networks as a tool of outreach and targeting; with activities put exclusively in the environment of online social networks; with partisan practices of intervention into public and private online spaces, and with other forms of activism that is practiced within online social media, but not limited to them.

This variety of practices brings us to the next question of more general frame where these actions take place, and by discussing the concepts of shrinking civil society space and its structure, I will try to put mediated activism in more rooted context.

2.2.4. Shrinking Civil Society Space and Structure of Political Opportunities

For many years, while talking about restrictive spaces, both academic and civil publics have been operating with the classical theory of “open-restrictive-closed” spaces introduced by Popper and later developed and implemented by nongovernmental organizations across the world, such as Amnesty International, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and many others (Popper, 2013). The notion of the “open space” was used to define a type of social organization that has democratic processes as its core and implements equality, participation in politics, justice and respect as its values. On the other side of spectrum Popper put the “closed space”: a type of society where dominating political players try to impose their version of reality and prosecute for changes in it (Popper, 2013).

In the early 2010s, multiply global nongovernmental organizations started notorious debates about new processes that have been happening in restrictive contexts around the globe. Among the
observed worrying patterns, activists have given testimonies for increased repression from political structures, obstruction and persecution for social actions including prohibition of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression, implementation of new restrictive legislation, increased physical violence from the police, and cut of funding (Forum Syd, 2017). This new trend where the governments in restrictive contexts deliberately damage the situation for human rights, label NGOs as enemies of state and put pressure on activists in extremely brief period has been defined as “shrinking civil society space”, and Belarus has always been a part of this development.

According to numerous reports, the situation for human rights and LGBT+ rights have been degrading during the last decade in the country. Being put in a context where non-registered activities are punished according to the Criminal Code (Article 193.1) and registration of nongovernmental organization is impossible within openly homophobic governmental structures, LGBT+ activists have been forced to go underground and start their activities from ground zero, building community on personal contacts. In the early 2010s new groups and individuals have started their work with extremely weak or absent organizational and personal ties. These new actors have been rigorously using online media as tools for outreach, capacity and agenda building, and in 2014 MakeOut and DOTYK debuted as cultural initiatives that are dealing with promotion of equality. Not surprisingly, the LGBT+ issues have vanished from the front end of the agenda: to operate publicly and mitigate risks of administrative and criminal punishment, the organizations have used more general rhetoric of equality and social justice in physical spaces and continued their work on LGBT+ issues in safe closed spaces and online.

The concept of shrinking civil society space is especially important when one talks about mediated activism in Belarus. Though a lot of researchers who analyse contexts of Western democracies have arrived at decision that online media facilitate process of mobilization and engagement in social action, usually they miss the most crucial point in this discussion. Media facilitate process of engagement in social action where that action is legal (sanctioned by the governmental democratic structures, Women’s March as an example) or non-persecuted (not sanctioned by the structures but can’t be prohibited or suppressed due to weakness of governmental institutions, Arab Spring as an example). In Belarus the perceived ideal of social action as a protest or a demonstration is impossible which gives space for discussing what kind of social response one can wait from mediated activism.

The concept of structure of political opportunities might be prolific to expand this topic further. According to Marks and McAdam, there are four general dimensions of political opportunities: openness/closeness of political system; stability/instability of elites; presence/absence of elites; and state’s capacity for repression (Marks and McAdam, 1999). And
while Belarus doesn’t score much in this model as a closed system with non-changing political elites who control the whole repressive apparatus, Marks and McAdam make a fascinating comment that in closed systems of such kind the emergences of non-institutionalized activism is tightly connected with significant decrease in repressions, and while the protests might arise as a response to that inability of the government to repress, they will not necessarily do so. In other words, what is perceived as success of mediated revolution – massive protests and public gatherings – is only one example of social change. But then, if Belarusian LGBT+ activists operate in context where protesting is very unlikely, what kind of change are they trying to achieve? The possible answers to this question are going to be presented in the findings section together with more detailed and in-depth analysis of practices of mediated activism in Belarus.

3. Methods and Data Collection

The current research was intended to provide with insights into the individual experience of engagement in mediatized LGBT+ activism, analysis of power dynamics around such engagement and more instrumental components of activism, such as tools, activities, and methods. Thus, as three research questions designed specifically to investigate those matters had different focuses of inquiry: on personal stories of becoming, on vision of social change, and on practices of mediated activism – a mixed-methods approach was chosen to cover these diverse analytical needs.

Interview was chosen as a main method of retrieving material for analysis. By conducting semi-structured interviews, I have gathered material from 13 individuals using snow ball method for further analysis under RQ1 connected with stories of becoming, RQ2 connected with vision of social change, and RQ3 dealing with instruments of activism. The broadest part of analysis for RQ1 and RQ2 was performed with thematic analysis to highlight patterns and matching points, and then it was complimented with feminist CDA to examine more politicized aspects of identity and activist practice. Online ethnography – or netnography – was applied as a supplementary method on 34 written posts from personal Facebook pages of the activists participated in the interviews to enhance data and reflect upon actual practices in the online social networks.

As one can note, the chosen methods come from the realm of qualitative methods, and this choice is very much explained with an interest to interpret observed phenomena, rather than describing them in quantitative terms (Flick, 2007). One might argue that studies of mediated activism would benefit from quantitative component, especially if one is interested in instrumental side of activism. While that might be true for some cases where mediated activism has (or, rather, was perceived) to achieve major social changes that can be measured in quantitate terms, such as public protests, direct participation in legislative initiatives through petitions, mass participation
in flash-mobs, Belarusian context, unfortunately, provides with very limited examples of such changes inspired by any form of activism, least to say by mediated ones. The study on mediated activism in Belarus is a study not about achieved results, but rather a study about ongoing processes and dynamics within them, and because of that quantitative methods may not be the most apt tool to capture them.

However, it is worth mentioning that the current research, as well as any other research on mediated activism in Belarus, would gain a lot, if an additional perspective of analysis connected with audience response to activism was added. Due to time and resources limitation, this aspect of the activist practices was left out, but it could have helped to understand the structure of communication between LGBT+ activists and people who don’t identify themselves as such but are aware of LGBT+ community in Belarus.

3.1. Pilot Study

The initial attempt to investigate practices of activism employed by underprivileged groups was undertaken during November 2017 as a part of Methodology project course in Stockholm University. The aim of the research was to pinpoint stories of becoming LGBT+ activists and examine platforms and tools they use to advocate for LGBT+ causes. As one of the main goals for the pilot study was to try out methodological apparatus which consisted of interviews, thematic analysis and content analysis of written texts on personal Facebook pages of the activists, only two male gay activists from my personal professional circle who were available for the interviews at that moment were approached to participate in the study. Yet, even with this modest sample, during the analysis of the results of the interviews several valuable observations came into light.

Firstly, while thematic analysis as the main method proved to be helpful to generate overall picture of most prominent topics connected with activists’ experiences, an additional step was needed to critically address hidden patterns of inequalities. Thematic analysis was missing precision that could have assist to go into depth of revealed cases of public homophobia and burn-out. With that in mind, feminist critical discourse analysis was added as an additional method to account for those issues and build bridges between personal and political.

Secondly, the participants of the interviews provided with extensive accounts of mediated activism and its impact on them, both in terms of professional and personal capacities. During almost two hours long interviews, with the participants we have managed to cover not only the specificity of their usage of online social media connected with LGBT+ causes, but also to touch upon their private challenges of participating in such form of resistance. It was decided later to
focus on the interviews as the main method to retrieve information and then adopt netnography as a loose supplementary version of content analysis to look at the written texts.

Finally, it was discovered that participants were willing to talk about their private, sometimes intimate experience connected with their psychological state, relations with other activists and personal lives. This observation influenced on the interview guide for the current research and helped to include more questions related to identity and burnout connected to mediated activism.

The second pilot study was held late in February 2018: as the new, extended and revised interview guide was drafted, after posting an announcement on Facebook, I have interviewed a queer activist who reached out to me to participate in the research. Due to small general sample of people engaged in mediated forms of activism connected with LGBT+ causes in Belarus, the materials of the pilot interview in February were included in later analysis, and personal page of the interviewee was added as a material for netnography.

3.2. Interviews

When it comes to studying individual experiences, interview as a method appears to be one of the most appropriate choices. As Brickman points out, interviews are the most reliable tools when “one is interested in qualitative features of human experience, talk, and interaction” because they provide with insights to realities that are lived by the interviewees (Brickman, 2013, p. 4). As the focus of the current research was put on personal stories of LGBT+ activists and their knowledge of live-through practices of mediated activism, very early on in the process of drafting methodological apparatus interview was considered as a tool for collecting information about those matters.

However, together with pure scientific reasoning to choose interview, it was important to organize the space of the study in such a manner that activists would feel involved more as equal contributors rather than examined subjects to build mutual trust. Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible scheme of inquiry into matters that are of interest to the researcher, and together with that they give the interviewee the possibility to share the coherent interpretation of the meaning around those matters (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008, p.3).

Apart from enabling participants of the interviews to get new insights into social phenomena around them by providing with questions that help to reflect and to reason on a variety of subjects, semi-structured interviews give the researcher opportunity to follow-up on topics that might have been missed during the preparation stage (Folkestad, 2008, p.1). This aspect was especially valuable, as the participants of the interview, though being united with engagement with LGBT+
causes, came from various backgrounds and were exposed to different challenges, and, thus, gave diverse accounts of their involvement in mediated activism.

The interview guide which can be found in the Appendix A was designed to cover all three of the research questions and dive into both personal and professional experiences of activists. The guide was divided into two parts. Questions under “Set 1” touched upon personal stories of becoming an activist, and questions under “Set 2” were more focused on social change and mediated activism. Such logic of asking questions first about a self and only then about the activists’ practices was very much dictated by the necessity to create safe space and only then introduce politically sensitive topic of practicing activism.

3.2.1. Data sampling, collection and analysis

LGBT+ activists in Belarus engaged in mediated activism are exposed to online harassment, stalking, and provocations on a daily basis. Talking about participation in political or semi-political issues might breach their security and might impose threat not only to them, but also to a circle of relatives and friends, if activists are not open about their engagement. To ensure that interviewees would trust the researcher, I have approach close colleagues and fellow activists with whom we had previous experience of cooperation on LGBT+ issues, and, thus, used convenience sampling. During the interviews with those 6 activists, I have explicitly asked them to refer to other people whom they consider to be activists or to be engaged in mediated forms of activism and by that the next sample was constructed as “referential” and build it with the snow-ball method (Hansen & Machin, 2013, p. 217). While a lot of references were intersecting, I have gathered 6 other unique names and approached them with the request to participate in the interviews.

While these two groups might be seen sufficient enough to represent experiences connected with mediated activism in Belarus, it became apparent that from this group of 12 people, almost all of them were professionally connected with each other and (or) institutionalized initiatives and organizations working with LGBT+ cause in Belarus. To approach those activists who don’t identify themselves as a part of an organization and who exclusively operate in online social media, it was decided to use an additional sampling method and to post several announcements about possibility to participate in the research on my personal pages in Facebook and VK, and to ask activists from convenience sample to post/re-post the same announcement of their pages.

This decision, though it has risen the visibility of the research and attracted unwanted attention from people with negative attitudes toward LGBT+ communities, helped to legitimize the research. Several participants from the snow-ball sample have referred to seeing the announcement and willing to contact me themselves. And, while this added value was significant,
most importantly publication of the announcements helped to reach out to people who are practicing exclusively mediated activism and who live in the regions of the country.

All in all, 13 people have agreed to participate in the interviews within all three samples. The interviews were held from the end of February till the middle of April. Most of the interviews were held and recorded via Jitsi (Skype was described by some of the activists as “unreliable and unsecure”). All the participants of the interviews were informed about the recording and the process of assigning random name and numbers for transcription of the interviews.

As the collection of information from the interview was an ongoing process, right after the interview, the text was transcribed and prepared for further reading and theme coding for thematic analysis. In general, the interviews were about an hour and a half, conducted in Russian or Belarusian, based on preferences of the interviewee.

3.3. Thematic analysis

Many researchers praise thematic analysis as a method that is crucial in cases when the aim of the research is “to identify, analyse and report patterns (or themes) within given data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79; for discussion on advantages of thematic analysis see Bazeley, 2009; Attride-Stirling, 2001). As an analytical lens, thematic analysis suggests focussing on recurrent issues in the texts, and by long-term familiarization with the data, repetitive reading and extraction of those issues, it aspires to build a coherent network that summarizes the main themes in sampled texts (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 387).

The notion of “theme” is central for the thematic analysis. Theme (or pattern) “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 82). To get more apt comprehension of themes and their relation to each other in texts, Attride-Stirling suggested to adopt three levels scheme to distinguish between diverse types of themes and mark their hierarchy (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 388). Themes of the first level – basic themes – are coming directly from the texts; it is something that is marked by the researcher during close reading of texts, and they represent occurrence in one text, rather than in the whole sample. The second level themes – organizing themes – are clusters of basic themes grouped to represent some theoretical principles. Themes of the third level – global themes – are metaphorical keys that capture essence of the texts and provide with general overview into important aspects in the sample.

From the first sight, it might appear that thematic analysis and its operational apparatus – themes – are simple, if not too simple, to apply. However, the appeared simplicity of this type of analysis is demolished with more in-depth understanding of how the operationalisation works.
In the current research, thematic analysis was designed and applied according to steps, introduced by Attride-Stirling, and then on the final stages of the analysis, the model “describe, compare, relate” was applied to extracted organizational themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Bazeley, 2009, p.6). The flow of the conducted analysis can be described in three stages. During the first stage, the texts were read multiple times to provide with preliminary comprehension of what themes are present. On this stage, initial coding took place, and equipped with a set of codes, I have dissected the text into smaller fragments trying to pinpoint occurrences corresponding with the codes and adjusts the codes if necessary. On the next stage, closer work with themes was put into practice: I have explored the texts, identified basic themes and enhanced them by comparing them with each other in each separated text and then with other texts. The third stage was the stage of generalization: while the basic themes were described, compared and related to each other, organizing themes organically arose from them and later connected to each other with global themes.

3.3.1. Data sampling, collection and analysis

The data for thematic analysis were provided with transcripts of interviews. All in all, 13 written texts from interview were analysed to design thematic network. As the general sample of the texts was quite modest, no additional sampling apart from that applied before interviews was made.

Thematic analysis has already been tried as a method of analysis of interviews texts during pilot study, and it has been revealed that the most fruitful way to operate within this corpus of texts is to orient oneself to three themes that were originally put into research questions: Identity, Activism, and Social Change, - and then allow the texts themselves to guide to other recurrent issues. The full scheme for connection between basic themes, organizing themes and global themes can be found in the Appendix B, and thematic map can be located in Appendix C.

3.4. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

While thematic analysis was applied as the main tool to navigate through the texts gathered from the interviews, feminist CDA was adopted as an additional tool of examining these texts not from the angle of themes noted and acknowledge by the interviewees, but from the angle of themes silenced and unrecognized. According to the classical definition by Fairclough & Wodak, discourse analysis is a type of analytical perspective that investigates production of texts and their meaning as a social practice, and it emphasizes power relations that take place within those meanings (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). To put it in other words, discourse analysis helps to notice
previously taken for granted aspects of perceived reality, deconstruct them and thoroughly examine how power is present there, how power imbalance is produced, sustained and replicated in a given context, and what inconsistencies and paradoxes can be used to critically address such an order (Fairclough, 1995; Krzyżanowski & Forchtner, 2016).

While CDA as a method has been widely acknowledged in the academia as a valuable tool of zooming in ideology and power, it is important to underline that the current research, though being inspired by classical works and canonical theorization of CDA, comes from the feminist theoretical perspective and, thus, is informed by it. As Lazar puts it, the main difference between CDA and feminist CDA is the scrutinizing interest in gendered aspects of meanings and open commitment to demystification of such aspects (Lazar, 2005).

The notion of power that comes crosscutting through the whole framework of CDA is crucial when it comes to deconstruction of gendered realities. The perceived naturalization and legitimation of gender order that impose expectations not only to one’s body and gender identity, but also to one’s participation in politics is something that Lazar describes as an ideological structure, cultivated and flourishing in a given discourse (Lazar, 2007). And, yet, it is important to underline that while ideology and power are everywhere around, LGBT+ activists due to their various intersecting identities in realms of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and many others, experience the impact of omnipotent power on different levels (Foucault, 1980; Bowleg, 2008). To catch those differences and to address holistically the challenges and struggles of political practices that confront normative order, the concept of power in the current research would be broadened and, at the same time, narrowed down to the term “heteronormativity”.

Heteronormativity here is implemented as a concept that deals with multilayer ideological patriarchal structures that regulate not only the gendered meaning, but also meanings of identity, sex, sexuality and relations between people (Ahmed, 2006).

The topics of sexuality and politics often come together as themes that are relatively addressed directly: being silenced and tabooed in the public sphere, these themes often remain unchallenged and normalised within given power structure (Foucault, 1980). By addressing these topics dissected from public discussion and by revealing how heteronormativity impact the mode of operations of LGBT+ activists, their experiences connected with mediated activism and their vision of social change that might be achieved with these actions, the current research aims to touch upon connection between personal trauma or oppression and political response to it.

As Lazar puts it, the trick of the modern power is its cognitive character: it is not openly imposed and secured by political institutions and their tools of punishment, rather its norms and routines are internalized and performed on everyday basis (Lazar, 2007). Thus, to trace footprints
of identity, sexuality and gender in personal experience of mediated activism and highlight interplay between heteronormativity and practices of (un)conscious resistance to it, it was decided to continue work with interviews materials and deepen the analysis by laying an additional analytical lens on them.

### 3.4.1. Data sampling, collection and analysis

Feminist CDA was used in the current research as an additional tool to investigate power relations and to build more coherent understanding of forces within mediated LGBT+ activism. And while this aspect of analysis could have been expanded and elaborated more, in order to perform feminist CDA in reasonable timeframe and get at least some insights into activists’ experiences, it was decided to apply heteronormativity and social change as two additional global themes to thematic analysis.

Thus, the data collected through the interviews and transcribed texts became the materials for the CDA as well. No additional sampling was performed, but the focus of the analysis was put in the questions under set 1 and several questions under set 2, connected with personal stories of becoming activists and envisioning of social change.

While one might have expected to receive testimonies on governmental prosecution and more direct mechanisms of pressure and control connected with ideological desire to sustain heteronormative order in Belarus, the reality has appeared to be subtler and less tangible. One of the challenge of the research was to design such a process of linking materials of the interview to heteronormativity in such a way that would reflect the lived-through realities of the activists and still would be able to provide with a broader perspective on power dynamics around LGBT+ activists. To validate linking to heteronormativity as a global theme, I have operationalized it with three main organizing themes: expected violence, self-censorship, and absent state/present social repressions. These three organizing themes can also be described as discursive practices of silencing: following Foucault argument, when the element of discourse doesn’t submit to the current ideological order, it is claimed to be insane and abnormal, and, as it cannot belong to the given discourse, it is excluded from it (Foucault, 1980). By pursuing these practices of segregation, physical and verbal abuse and public disregard to the LGBT+ matters that were noted by the activists, heteronormativity was analysed not as a static power structure, but as a performed everyday practice targeting LGBT+ activists and individuals.

Respectively, social change as a global theme was operationalized into two organizing themes: recognition of LGBT+ and reduction of violence.

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3.5. Netnography

Online ethnography – or netnography – was added as a supplementary method to the current research to get broader understanding of instruments and activities that constitute mediated LGBT+ activism in online social networks. As Kozinets describes it, the aim of a netnographic study is to provide insights in people’s behaviour with analysis of their interaction and communication online (Kozinets, 2010). Together with taking notes, reflecting upon personal reactions to posts and observing behaviours, the research marks common pattern and analyse structures supported by these structures, as well as paying attention to discourses emerging around (Hine, 2015).

Netnography in the current research was a supplementary tool that helped to understand what kind of posts activists produce online, what reactions those post provoke and what are the other components of activism that have been missed during the interviews. One might argue that content analysis could have been sufficient to provide with the same overview, however, as it was rigorously argued by Costello et al., netnography, as it is not interested with establishing “true” identities or “textual truth”, is especially well-suited to study communities that are engaged in marginalized topics, because it observes them and tries to understand, not only to describe (Costello et al., 2017). Secondly, content analysis would have deal exclusively with online produced texts, but, as it was previously marked in the section of employed terms, it is quite impossible to draw a distinctive line between online and offline activism. These undefined boundaries between various forms of mediated activism are something that requires broader scope of analysis that allows to connect materials from online social networks with other observations and testimonies, and netnography provides such an opportunity (Tuncalp & Le, 2014). As analysis of materials from online social networks alone might have been unsatisfactory to get a full picture of online practices, to solve this issue, I have decided to base my interpretation of netnographic materials on accounts of actions and themes provided by the LGBT+ activists in their interviews.

3.5.1. Data sampling, collection and analysis

To realistically design netnographic part of the current research, it was decided to analyse only personal pages of LGBT+ activists who participated in the interviews on Facebook, as it was mentioned as the most used platform and who had open public profiles. All in all, 8 personal pages were selected for netnographic study, and 34 posts were collected from them. To limit the sample and to get sense of how mediated activism relates to topics of social interest, I have decided to analyse post published exclusively in February 2018. February 23rd is the public holiday called “the Day of the Motherland Defender”; typically, the celebration of this holiday includes activation
of discourses connected with positive attitudes toward hegemonic masculinity, militarism, and patriarchal gender roles. It was assumed that this occasion might serve as an example of how LGBT+ activists address those issues and use them for educational purposes.

The collection of materials, their visualization and their further analysis and interpretation requires extensive amount of time, and, therefore, for a netnographic study it is essential to choose such a method of analysis that would help to reduce time expenses for it (Kozinets, 2010). To ensure anonymity of the participants for the netnography, it was decided to screenshot posts and discussions under them from the personal pages without personal details such as name and surname and then create coded folders for participants, where posts from their pages where stored chronologically. To save the connection with the materials, to be able to interpret them in line with earlier performed analysis and to have a possibility to put down field notes, I have decided to proceed with manual coding of the materials and their interpretation (Kozinets, 2010).

The process of analysis was divided into two main flows: analysis of individual profiles and analysis of general trends. Analysis of individual profiles consisted of several steps. First, each post was examined for its origin: whether it was created by the author of the page or it was a repost. Secondly, each post was colour-coded with a theme or themes that were discussed in it. The list of themes was designed after preliminary examination of raw sampled materials. Thirdly, the content of the post was examined: whether it contains only texts, text with pictures, or videos. And, finally, the reactions for the post were considered. Together with the analysis of the post, I have been taken notes about my own reactions to the content and discussion below the post. Kozinets writes, that the analysis performed with netnography should describe social world and reflect upon experiences of its members, and, therefore, by commenting my personal accounts of the effect I experienced by engaging with those post, I managed to get an insight into how other people might experience them as well (Kozinets 2010, 116). After each profile was analysed individually, the disconnected trends were summarized and generalized and formed into general overview. The example of colour-coding for a given post can be found in Appendix D, and the coding table can be found in the Appendix E.

4. Results and Discussion

Before going into detailed discussion of results of the current study, it is important to mention several developments that took place during past three month when the study has been held. Firstly, the cultural queer-festival DOTYK that was planned for the first weekend of April (same dates as the celebration of the orthodox Easter) has been reported by concerned citizens as “offending the feelings of religious groups” (same phrasing that is used in the current Russian legislation in
connection to prevention of “gay propaganda”). The festival has been investigated by local authorities, and it was forced to close its format and move to a secret location sent only to registered participants. Secondly, a brand-new trans*gender group has started its work with an event dedicated to self-care and support – something that hasn’t been introduced in Minsk before for trans*people. And, thirdly, as preliminary results of the current research were shared with the interviewees, two initiatives have been discussed in relation to prevention of burnout and recognition of LGBT+ activism in Belarus.

All of this brings us to the point where it is essential to look at the Belarusian context in its complexity and avoid simplifications that are sometimes made to give a more “appealing” picture of restrictive closed space that fall into the trope of “the last dictatorship in Europe”. While, indeed, work with LGBT+ rights and mediated activism are challenged both by the authorities and the public, and most activists faces threats due to their engagement, it is crucial to underline opportunities for local and international communities to show their solidarity, to spread data about LGBT+ activists in Belarus and to take a stance on discrimination and inequality in the country. The repressive processes go alongside with resistive actions and in a lot of ways provide with new political opportunities to foster social movements.

The current chapter will explore and discuss thoroughly the results of thematic analysis combined with the critical discourse analysis and findings of netnographical study. The thematic analysis section will present the global theme firstly (i.e. “Heteronormativity and state control”) and then will de-construct it further to organizing themes (i.e. “Expected violence”, “Absent state, present social repressions”, “Preventive reporting and self-censorship”). The full thematic map can be found in the Appendix C, and the table of themes and their identified elements, as it was mentioned before, is located in the Appendix B. The findings of the netnographical study will be used in several places to illustrate some of discussed issues touched upon themes in the interviews data, but more elaborated picture will be presented after examination of thematic analysis. The example of netnographical analysis on a given post and table for coding can be found in Appendix D and E respectively.

4.1. Thematic analysis

4.1.1. Heteronormativity and state control: moveable feast

As Ahmed puts it, the power of the notion of heteronormativity is in its complexity: it goes beyond gender and sexuality and addresses multiply layers of imbalances hidden between personal relationships and relations with the society (Ahmed, 2006). To sustain this power of the concept, it is important to talk about heteronormativity not as a blatant cultural and social context where
specific type of gender expression and sexuality are anticipated in relation to LGBT+ mediated activism, but to understand it as a ferocious mechanism of imposing power and silencing individuals who don’t comply with the system of beliefs and expectations.

As more and more interviews’ data were analysed, it became vividly clear that heteronormative order and its imposition entangle vast range of conservative issues connected with religion (LGBT+ identities as violations of God will), family (connection to LGBT+ community as marker of inability to create a nuclear family), personal relations (pro-LGBT+ stance as a basis for confrontation), and culture (LGBT+ existence as radicalized practice). As ZB, partisan activist who participates in online discussion with a purpose of defending LGBT+ community, puts it: “The discussion of LGBT very often flows into bordering topics, such as attitudes toward abortion, gender equality. In general, people who show aggression don’t differentiate between notions, they just hate everything that is not alike their beliefs”. Thus, though some of the LGBT+ activists might advocate for one topic only – LGBT+ rights – in fact, they resist the entire system of heteronormativity and face reaction from its whole repressive apparatus.

For methodological reasons that were elaborated in the previous chapter, heteronormativity is put into a separate category of critical discourse analysis to obtain space to talk in more sophisticated manner about the impact and the actual experience of resistance. However, from the interviews and testimonies of the activists, it is quite clear that existence in a normative space and resistance to it cannot be separated from the actual practice of activism. The process of doing activism is carved into the process of living in heteronormative system, and the form of mediated activists action is closely connected with forms of oppression.

It is not a coincidence that heteronormativity as a global theme is united with the state control. In the end of the day, the state is the ultimate executioner of gender order in a given society, and it sustains the hegemony of gender and sexuality by providing models that are accepted and those that are rejected. The global theme of heteronormativity and state control have been composed as an overarching theme for three themes constituting power dynamics within mediated activism: expected violence, social repressions, and self-censorship.

4.1.1.1. Expected violence

“For some time, I have been keeping in secret the name of my organization [business company, not related to LGBT+ issues], my university, I’m still not publishing the status “in relationship”. (…) There were some cases when people wrote to my husband that I’m a lesbian, but they did it in Russian, and he doesn’t speak any Russian”. The way ZB describes the influence of her engagement into partisan posting is a very peculiar insight into the relations between
violence and LGBT+ activists, as it underlines the awareness about the violence, the necessity to mitigate its effects and its inescapability.

Harassment, verbal and physical aggression, organized hate, stalking, assaults and bulling—all these forms of violence were mentioned by the interviewees as satellites of their mediated activism. While the aggression and violence toward other activists were often mentioned as frustrating and upsetting components of being present and publicly speaking for LGBT+ rights, the normalization of violence to oneself is quite vividly shown when activists “forget to mention” or try to reduce the importance of it as a component of their own experience. L8 who promotes alternative forms of masculinity and queerness recollects his experience in school: “Why has everything continued with the social media? Well, because I was gaining more and more popularity, not only in the school, but also in the town, people started to create anti-groups [in the VK social network], there were five of them. There were different topics there, how and with what to kill me”. It is important to highlight here that though the interviewee clearly speaks about these developments as violent actions, he frames the violence as an expected result of being more visible in the public sphere, talking about non-normative issues. In the actual posts produced by the activists on Facebook, homophobia and aggression as social problems were framed only in 9 posts, coming from two activists working with the topic of hate-crime.

And same recurrent theme of violence as something that inevitable follows publicity is encountered in other narratives. Even in the most distant cases, when the interviewees talk about their other professional circles, the expected violence is there. R3, describing her relations with professional community of gestalt therapists to which she belongs, says: “In the community I studied, I see a lot of homophobic things, and I have another filter. I can’t understand how I should combine all of this to avoid aggressive confrontation”.

The blurring line between virtual and factual is taken even further when activists describe, how their stance in online spaces affect their “offline” lives. QV talks about her experience with her relatives: “Opinions [about her stance on LGBT+] could have been absolutely different, but they have always been pronounced very aggressively, passionately; always meaning that I should avoid participating in the discussion”. UW who writes articles about LGBT+ rights has faced significant complications in her work environment, after her colleagues learnt about her work in the media. “They were trying to get to you. For example, you are working, and then they say, with no reason at all: “When my Timur will grow up, he will beat the shit out of those faggots” – with love in their voices”.

From a discursive perspective, all these repressive strategies and tactics of aggression are used for silencing the activists, and they gain their influence through normative power structures,
protecting and nourishing them. It is fascinating that the topic of LGBT+ becomes so charged in a normative society that even those individuals who formally fit into the normative standards (for example, ZB and UW have heterosexual marital relations) are attacked for posing a threat to the power structures. As the pressure on the activists never comes from a single person, but rather is fostered by groups of people, it is crucial to address the question about power and capacity of the activists to fight against the imposed violence.

The recurrent topic connected with the theme of expected violence is lack of instruments to mitigate the effects of aggression. Though most interviewees talk about banning, blocking, and deleting from friends as common strategies of reducing harm, almost everyone has pointed to insufficiency of these tools. The topic of social vulnerability comes again when the activists who blocked and reported individuals get into “offline” environments. L8 recollects his arrival to his hometown: “I went out to buy cigarettes, and I understood that my hometown didn’t forget me. I heard a lot of shouts in my back. It was scary”.

Among the reported issues connected with aggression toward mediated activism, interviewees have mentioned insomnia, anxiety, fear, depression, panic attacks, and nervous breakdowns. None of the interviewees has explicitly mentioned any external instruments of coping with the stress and aggressive environments (apart from therapy that is mostly used to deal with other issues), and very few have talked about their personal strategies of mitigation. AX who is promoting trans*gender rights describes his experience of mediated activism in a drastically negative way: “Every day I want to leave. It is connected with the tons of hatred, that is poured on me. [How do you emotionally cope with hatred?] Very poorly, terribly. I have chronic depression and anxiety disorder. Sometimes I just had to shut down social media”.

As no fruitful instruments to mitigate risks are available, the activists have to find other solutions of how to continue their work. The burden of reframing, rephrasing and building communication in such a way that doesn’t provoke aggression from other people falls on the activists, and it leads us to other theme of self-censorship.

4.1.1.2. Self-censorship and preventive reporting

When the external instruments of leverage appear to be ineffective for activists to reduce impact of the imposed repressive mechanisms, they seek for other solutions to mitigate risks. Self-censorship, or deliberate not posting, or selective posting, or self-silencing on some occasions, turns to be a theme present in experience of all interviewees. For YQ, “activism is a constant moral choice when you have to weight relations with other people, [to weight] the chance to get aggression and get your relations affected. You follow check-list for all these points, and then you
decided whether you want to react or not to react upon the shit around you”. In many cases, as the expected violence follows the activists on social media and goes beyond to physical spaces, the choice of when to speak and what to say is indirectly limited by the shadow of aggression and then further reduced by lack of supportive media space.

While one could suggest that mediated activism could easily be done via anonymous or fake accounts to lower harm, none of the interviewees mentioned this possibility, and rather on the country, many of them have underlined the necessity to “speak in their own name”. W5P is posting on her Facebook rarely, according to her own words (this account of “rarely” is up to the debate and raises the question of how much is much, as W5P posts at least 1 personal post connected with LGBT+ issues per week). But when she does post something, she does that “very consciously, because I feel that it is important for me to write this text, so people would understand something about me. (…) Often these posts are post of LGBT+ person, I describe my teenager experience, I react on things around”.

Self-censorship was marked as a full developed practice used by many activists in vulnerable economic position (especially for those activists who are employed by the state), as connection to LGBT+ community or public stance on LGBT+ issues are used as a non-spoken basis for discrimination of various kinds, from public humiliation to dismissal. QV, for example, is sharing her experience of lesbian existence on Instagram, but when it comes to other social media, she silences herself: “I have to admit that I’m quite afraid that people at work won’t accept my activist engagement well. […] From several discussions with my boss, I have understood that she was not ready to accept LGBT+ community. I have colleagues in friends both on Facebook and VK”.

This observation is further exposed on the personal pages of the activists on Facebook. Those activists who are employed at the state institutions such as universities or publishing houses avoid posting on their personal pages any materials that are even remotely connected with gender equality and LGBT+ rights. And while they don’t publish posts on their own pages, they actively engage very actively in commenting posts on the pages of other LGBT+ activists who create such materials on their private pages. Two interesting notes are taken from this situation. First, as the independent media are unable to provide with any forum for discussion on LGBT+ rights, personal pages on Facebook occupy this niche and serve as a place for reflection. Secondly, as Facebook doesn’t share any control over how posts are seen in the newsfeed, those activists who are running open pages where posts are rigorously commented by others end up at risk, as these posts might be shown to individuals who have conservative views and who can report these posts are inappropriate.
These uncontrolled algorithms are something that affect life outside of the mediated spaces. After articles published by UW under her passport name became popular on the social media, she immediately felt backlash. “I work in a state institution, and now when my engagement has reached some level of fame, I started to get problems. The colleagues started to secretly make pictures of me, to report and to libel. (…) It doesn’t hurt you, but it drives you insane”.

And the interesting part of this process is that none of the activists are engaged in illegal activities. Most of the activists operate as individuals not affiliated to any political parties or non-registered non-governmental entities, and, thus, they don’t violate the law on the assembly or the law on media. As Belarus has never openly prosecuted or politically discriminated LGBT+ community in an organized way (and, on several rare occasions, on the contrary, the state and the local authorities tried to cooperate and provide legal help to the victims of hate-crime)\(^1\) and it is still a signatory on several conventions on elimination of discrimination, it is not clear what is the final aim of the informants who submit their reports to the authorities or to the management. One of the explanation might be that the informants are trying to prevent “anything dangerous” from happening: whether it is political activities or social changes, - and this fear of LGBT+ activists is something that can be quite easily attributed to the influence of Russian media propaganda\(^2\). To rephrase it, it might be the case that though the state itself doesn’t promote open discrimination against LGBT+ community or LGBT+ activists, the informants who are willing to develop conservative right agenda are using this mechanism as a power tool to re-enforce the heteronormative order.

And while direct verbal and physical violence and threats online are managed to certain extent by blocking and ignoring aggressors and harassers (leaving at least some agency for activists), preventive reporting appears to be a mechanism that completely takes away that agency and force activists into self-censoring. The question is what are the penalties if one doesn’t want to be silenced?

4.1.1.3. Absent state, present social repressions

“They [the secret services] have been holding educational discussions with me, that one can’t tell women about their reproductive rights: there is a demographic crisis in Belarus, and women have to give birth. (…) There were claims that I’m corrupting Belarusian society, implementing Westerns ideas that related to feminism at that moment”. The experience recollected by H11 who

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\(^1\) These cases, of course, shouldn’t be treated as a conscious policy of Belarusian state to protect LGBT+ individuals; rather one should address these occasions as system errors where judges or police officers decided to make decisions on their own according to steering documents in the country.

\(^2\) In fact, preventive reporting has already become a topic for discussion in feminist community in Russia. In April 2018 feminist collective in Saint-Petersburg made an exhibition called “One cannot be too careful\(\backslash\) «Как бы чего не произошло» dedicated to censorship and prosecution of freedom of speech.

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has been a part of development and promotion of gender studies in Belarus is dated to the early 2000s and serves as almost the only case narrated by the activists in relation to direct state interventions into mediated activism. While in private conversations activists sometimes mention that they were approached with the offers to collaborate with the secret services for their activities in public spaces, the pressure from the state is almost extinct in their narrations about their actual experiences of practicing activism in social media and is rarely mentioned as a possible factor of explanation why some people might be hesitant to claiming activist identity.

One can assume that involvement in advocacy of legislation or public protests, in comparison to any other activities, was recognized as a threat by the secret services or other bodies of the state, and that is why H11 and several other activists were exposed to pressure that was absent in other cases. Another reading of the situation might be that the state hasn’t find a tool that would be efficient in silencing activists online, although it is now exploring its options. If that is true, then one can clearly address the very existence of mediated LGBT+ activism in Belarus and its development as a result of reduced state capacity to repress (Marks and McAdam, 1999).

Together with all said, one should consider that the activists themselves and their practices of nomadism and situational interventions play a crucial role in not attracting the interest of the state. There is a comprehension within the community of activists built due to years of previous repressions and violations from the state of which types of actions should be avoided (such as open political engagement, participation in mass protests, deliberate vocal critique of the government) to lay low and which types of actions are impossible and even harmful due to legal consequences, low chances of engagement of other people and disturbances in the image of LGBT+ activism in Belarus. When talking about massive “offline” statement, LD who is developing an advocacy campaign against hate-crime addresses them very sceptically: “[How do you think, what would happen if we had a huge protest to support LGBT+ rights tomorrow in Minsk?] If the scale was large… I don’t know. Nothing would happen. There would be some reaction from the authorities, and that depends on how critically protesting the event would be and so on, some publications in the media that it happened, and someone was detained”.

On the other hand, though the direct actions from the state are absent at this moment, the deeds in the name of the state and its shadow are very present. The character of mediated activism, the instruments and tool used by the activists and the topics they cover are based on the previous personal or communal experience of being repressed and discriminated and in majority of cases they are done as in opposition to previous political history in the country. In such a context, the state doesn’t need to repress more, as its previous interventions have already suppressed free speech and expression and set the standard for inappropriate actions, and it can delegate some of
the functions to its citizens. UW, for example, has been reported to the Committee of Governmental Security (KDB, Камітэт Дзяржаўнай Бяспекі) for her article that didn’t violate any law.

So, while the state is not intervening in the mediated LGBT+ activism, it doesn’t need to do it to control the way the activists are operating. Concerned citizens, violence, self-control, preventive reporting, and awareness of those who have been repressed create a context where critical actions and social change endanger those who are engaged. And yet still, some people make choice to participate and take that risk: identity and sense of social justice appear to be stronger than any prospective threats.

4.1.2. Identity as “doing”: how much is much?

What does it mean to be an LGBT+ activist in mediated spaces? For the interviewees, it means to write articles, to post, to comment, to intervene in online discussions, to promote events, to share information, to educate and to explain. In other words, being an activist means doing something, and this leads us to the discussion of how practicing and performing constitutes the experiences of being someone.

The theme of doing (and doing something enough) cross-cuts experiences of all the interviewees, when they speak about their own relations with the activist identity. As it appears, there are no “tipping points” into activist identities, because becoming an activist, according to the narratives of the LGBT+ activists, is not a personal decision. Identity becomes a result of acknowledgment from the community or from inner groups in the community, and it offers entry into a rigorous process of doing something to stay within this notion, to be rightful to claim it, and to apply to oneself.

The necessity to sufficiently perform publicly and politically engage in relevant issues is something that shadows activists in their activities, and according to their own accounts, influences on other’s decisions to engage in practicing activism. R3, for example, puts it like this: “If you speak openly [about yourself as an activist], it feels like almost immediately you have to go to some tv-shows, you have to be accountable for all the LGBT+ activists or LGBT+ people”. JK who mentioned that he talks about himself as an activist only when he is heavily participating in activities for the community, agrees that if he would spend all his time and resources for activism, then it would be easier to claim this identity. The non-spoken standard of being an LGBT+ activist, according to the interviews, includes the following categories, some of which go beyond mediated spaces: 1) exclusivity of efforts (a person is supposed to invest all or most of the time to activism); 2) public speaking (a person is supposed to visit public event or organize them to talk about
LGBT+ rights); 3) acknowledgment from others (a person should be called an activist, not call themselves an activist); 4) engagement in capacity building (a person is supposed to share skills and knowledge with other people in the community). While all the activists address critically these categories and mark that they negatively affect amount of new people who want to join resistive actions, the personal awareness of how these categories distress activists themselves is low.

As this notion of identity as a process of doing doesn’t have establish borders (or neither it has someone to put these borders), activists are trying to fill this notion with various kinds of work and activities, and though this process open possibilities for nomadism, it still entangles frustration, self-doubt and alienation to some extent. To tackle these issues, the global theme of “identity as doing” will be explored in three organizing themes: nomadism and situational performance, impostor identities, and “one-person” voice.

4.1.2.1. Nomadism and situational performance

For Braidotti, one the main theorist of queer nomadism, nomadism is a process of relocation, both physical and intellectual, it is a process of transfiguration, of habiting and leaving spaces, of being and not-being (Braidotti, 2011). For Belarusian LGBT+ activists, nomadism is explored in two senses: firstly, it is a very physical practice of leaving some locations in favour of safer, non-normative spaces; and, secondly, it is fluidity between identities and their performances.

When it comes to relocation and leaving, the interviewees start with their experience of migration: out of 13 respondents, 7 individuals have moved to Minsk from smaller regional centres. All the interviewees started their engagement in mediated activism and began to talk about LGBT+ issues on social media after their relocation to Minsk, and this might be explained both as a result of safer space around or invisibility to certain extent, and presence of other actors engaged in similar activities.

However, this openness has its own downside, as it is connected with risk of poverty. JK, together with other interviewees, marks that public or semi-public stance on LGBT+ usually put people in vulnerable position: “Typically for Belarusian precariat activists, I have three different jobs, one is the main one, and two others, they are changing. And then I have activism”. Those of activists who are engaged in LGBT+ organizations or initiatives as their main job also point at nomadic nature of their occupation due to financial or organizational reasons: “I have occupied various positions in different projects. I have been a project manager, I have run social media…” (R3) or “I came as a volunteer (…). Then I joined the team for one year, I thought I would be a just a manager, but then the PR specialist has left, and they asked me to do it” (KQ). The fluidity between different occupations within LGBT+ organization is quite easily explained with lack of
resources within the community. KQ, for example, decided to invest her resources into organizational identity: “When I was a volunteer, I started to make posts dedicated to March 8, some LGBT+ events. Then my online activity became mostly me running social media for the organization”.

Coming to virtual spaces, the activists report that they have to migrate between different platforms to produce different narratives and different “selves”. Some of the activists, for example, who originally were active on VK have migrated their activities to FB with more active and “expert” community to reach out to more professionalized non-governmental individuals. The others, on the contrary, decided to leave Facebook for professional contacts only, and then use other platforms to talk about LGBT+ related matters. As public debates on issues of equality often cause negative affect at work or on personal level, the activists have to “pick their fights”. YQ recalls a recent experience when she wanted to call out a racist student but instead of changing her opinion the student insisted on continuing being racist: “I was upset, but, on the other hand, I have Facebook and Telegram channel, where I can cry about it and tell what happened, and people will support me”.

The situational performance, however, for many activists ends up being a major factor of distress. On several accounts, interviewees have spoken about activists as people who need to be present and vocal all the time, and none have considered themselves to be an example of such a public figure. “I look at other activists and I think that I have to do more, but I can’t do more. I do what evet I can, but then sometimes I get the feeling that I shout at the closed door” (UW). This self-doubt and questioning of activist identity brings us to the next topics of impostor identities to discuss how high expectations and normative standards of political actions influence on matters of identity.

4.1.2.2. Impostor identities

When it comes to discussing social actions in Belarus, in their narratives LGBT+ activists effortlessly recall the main examples of what they see as testimonies of being or becoming an activist. Participating in marches, joining manifestations and protests, organizing public gatherings are often named as activists’ action. It is impossible not to mention that in Belarusian context this kind of political actions are very tightly connected with representatives from the opposition to the state, the majority of which is constituted by white middle-age heterosexual men who tend to conservative rhetoric in relation to gender and sexuality matters. Mostly, the individuals devote their whole time and construct their lives around their political engagement, as generally it means facing prosecution, arrests and withdraw from any other social activities.
As activism, and its result, activist identity, performed by LGBT+ activists fall out of this normative scheme of Belarusian political actions, activists themselves try to build a new system of coordinates to understand which types of activism they perform and how their identities can relate to these social actions. All respondents in one way or another indicated this almost invisible logic of separation from “classical” forms of activism. Though this separation reduces the interest from the authorities and helps of eliminate patriarchal normative control, it also leaves activists unrecognized in their own community.

In all the cases, recognition from others played enormous role in accepting or putting on the activist identity. Though self-doubt is present, for many interviewees the fact that others in the community or in civil society have started to call them activists was the main point of starting to analyse whether they were activists. The lack of recognition and communal appreciation negatively affected the bond between reclaiming of the identity and the ability to speak up as an activist. On several accounts different activists have been using almost the same phrasing to share their concerns about their activists’ identities: “My doubts in my activist identity were mainly connected with me doing too little. Was I worthy of such a title?” (KQ), “It seemed to me that I wasn’t educated enough, that I didn’t have enough experience to call myself an activist” (QV), “I’m doing this [calling herself an activist] for such a long period of time, but inside I still have doubts when I say that I’m an activist” (R3), “I don’t call myself an activist, this word is too huge for me” (UW). The interesting part that this theme of “not being enough” or being an impostor is mainly encountered in narratives by those of the interviewees who had experience of women’s socialization. One might assume that the general social stereotypes about participation of females and nonbinary people in public spaces meshed together with extremely masculinized figures of other activists in Belarus leave female LBT+ activists in especially vulnerable position where there is no acknowledgement for their inputs. The individuals who have experience of masculine socialization are more prone to either drift between identities (L8: “It’s not really important for me to call myself an activist. If it is necessary, I will call myself that, if not – I won’t”) or to underline presence of this identity (LD: “Activist… Yes, this is my identity. But it was hard to accept it”).

The theme of impostor identity goes closely with inability to ask for support from the community and lack of self-appreciation. In the interviews where the “impostor” theme was marked, the activists usually mention being burned-out and facing psychological and mental challenges connected with work overload, but when it comes to tools of coping with these issues, mostly, the interviewees have none or even underlined that there are people in higher need of those resources: “If I don’t have any energy, but I see that there is another person who also doesn’t have it. I tell myself that my problems can wait, because this person needs support” (QV).
of self-sacrifice is less present in the interviewees with individuals connected to LGBT+ organizations: on the contrary, activists were indicating some mechanism within organizations and their teams that help them to combat distress.

This organization specificity brings us to analysis of how individuals address issues of LGBT+ publicly and what relations to they have with complexity of experiences within the community when they represent it.

4.1.2.3. One-person voice

When she talks about LGBT+ issues, W5P, just as many other interviewees, talks with her own voice: “In the first place I talk about my personal experience, maybe, I don’t feel that I talk as a part of a community in that moment”. R3, echoing these words, adds: “I don’t feel that I can speak for other people. The only area of my full competence is my personal experience”. This theme of talking only about first-hand experiences, feelings, and encounters cross-cuts the monologues of LGBT+ activists. For many of them, such course of action comes from a very conscious choice to vacate space for others, to reduce level of monopolization of LGBT+ agenda in Belarus, and to avoid imposing their authority on any narratives that are not in line with their description of the situation.

In their account of how and why they write posts on social media, several interviewees clearly underline the importance of intersectionality in their work and necessity to reflect upon one’s power position. While in most situations the intersection is understood by the activists as clash between gender, sexuality, and gender identity, it is obvious that relocation and financial situation influence on which topics they decide to cover and who they decide to invest their resources. Generally, activists are aware about the challenges of other groups (for example, those who work with lesbian agenda explicitly mentioned challenges for trans*community to organize and to discuss publicly their agenda in terms of violence and transphobia) and they share contacts and resources. The inquiries about why ethnicity is an absent category in Belarusian context even among progressive actors and how matters of xenophobia can be addressed are still left for further investigation, however.

The awareness about complexity of intersections and sensitivity shown by the interviewees that despite modest amount of LGBT+ activists, the level of comprehension about power balance and variety of issues connected with representation and speaking in someone’s voice is very high. The horizontality of voices and potential access to spaces in social media where these voices can be heard is something that can be further investigated as a powerful prospect of recruiting of new activists and engaging more people into public discussion.

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Experience sharing appeared to be one of the most important topics encountered on Facebook posts as well. The posts where the individuals were telling personal stories connected either with oppressive actions or with support and emotional healing were the most discussed and most reacted to. In other words, the strategy of talking in one-person voice has shown as quite effective when it came to involvement and mobilizing of the community, however, as in none of the posts connected with oppressive actions there were no calls to actions, it is impossible to determine whether that mobilization had any measurable effect.

While from perspective of an individual activist, the choice of representing only oneself appears to be most suitable and sensitive, from the side of social action, joint organizing would be easier and would engage more individuals if there was a sense of shared identity and shared experience. During the interviews, it became apparent that there was no feeling in the community that there was someone who could represent the group and be a public speaker for its needs and interests. This open question about how representation and identity come into interplay with the notion of activism bring us to the discussion of the next global theme of activism.

4.1.3. The “other” activism: triple labor and burnout

When AX talks about his experience in mediated activism, he describes in fascinating manner what people think, when they think about activism in Belarus: “[When you say that you are doing activism], many people would think about naked people with flags on the main square, because there is no public activism outside of Ploscha in Belarus, the idea about peaceful protests is terribly distorted, no one will ever engage with that. It’s impossible to talk about safe, nonviolent activism, it just doesn’t exist in public mentality”. In European tradition of analysis of connective/collective actions, mediated activism is often seen as composed of four major components: triggering event, response from traditional media, viral organizing, and physical response (Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2014). However, in Belarus, as AX said, the public action in the physical space has never been an option that could be promoted after violent events and military suppression of civil protest “Ploscha” in 2010.

Taking it further, contributions to posts on social media may also be seen as dangerous. One illustrative example here may be the flash mob #этослучилосьсомной (this happened to me) that was launched as a part of advocacy campaign to combat hate-crime and was analyzed as a part of netnographic study. The initial post with two non-normative topics: violence against gay men and politics, - with call to action was quite popular on Facebook: it achieved 100 likes and 20 shares.

3 “Ploscha”, one the largest protest in Belarus happened after elections in 2010 as civil demand to annul the votes, in fact, is one of the cornerstone of Belarusian mediated activism when because of viral organizing. This particular protest falls exactly into 4-components structure, but, unfortunately, there are not that many other cases when social media worked in Belarus.
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and then several independent media have picked up the flash mob. However, apart from the activist who wrote the original post and another activist who work with the topic of toxic masculinity, no one contributed to the flash mob. For a perceptive observer, it would be apparent that people who show sympathy in the comments and who share the post don’t feel safe enough not only to join the political demands and advocate for changes in legislation, but even to share their own stories.

Activists themselves are aware that their actions and the purpose of those actions don’t fit into the “activist” standard. YQ and R3 working in the same organization have repeatedly underlined that they are doing “other” activism: “For many people, activism – is when you go to demonstrations, when you do posters, when you occupy the house of the parliament, when you are in opposition. My activism is softer” (R3). This issue of “otherness” brings another topic into the discussion: how much do activists work to be able to practice this “other” activism?

“I’m a musician, journalist, and activist” (AX), “I work in the publishing house, then I study full time, and then there is activism” (QV), “There is a part of freelance where I write and edit texts, my practice as therapist, and huge part of activism in my life” (R3) – the triadic structure of labour is dominating the narratives of the activists when they talk about what they do. According to the National Belarusian Statistic Committee, in January 2018 the average salary in Belarus was 350 euros, and this amount can be quite easily extrapolated on activists, because most of interviewees have stated their occupation in precarious or low-paid jobs in the sector of media, education or entertainment. JK, talking about his own situation with one full-time and two part-time jobs, doesn’t think that he is alone: “There are, of course, difference scenarios, but my guess would be that generally people in activism have three jobs, if they don’t have full-time employment in LGBT+ organizations”. The full-time employment in LGBT+ organizations also comes with a tricky component: as there are only four organizations that are working semi-legally, the amount of work places is extremely limited and highly depends on the projects that are currently implemented by the organization. As described by BN1, YQ and R3, during their involvement in organizational activities, they had to constantly re-adapt to new roles and new responsibilities once a year which in many instances was stressful.

The engagement in LGBT+ community is a major risk factor at work in state or business affiliated institutions, and, therefore, many activists are facing constant fear of poverty and economic instability. One of the frequently mentioned solutions was to shift all activities related to activism to free time and then use only personal tools such as PC or smartphones. The indirect indicators of excessive workload can also be found in the way the posts on social media are made: among 34 observed posts in February, around 2/3 of them was published in the early morning,
later evening or during the lunch hours which shows that activists use their personal time for rest and recover from overwork during the day to engage in LGBT+ issues.

And yet, in the narratives of LGBT+ activists, activism is seldom described as work or labour. Producing texts, sharing information about events, creating pictures and posts is, by many accounts, work (and for some interviewees, the work they do for others and receive money for), however, almost none of the individuals referred to activism as an occupation and, rather on the contrary, many tried to establish borders between work and activism (as an example, to my question “What does your activist work consist of?”, ZB replied: “It is not work per se, it is something I do on my free time… I wouldn’t call it work”). One explanation might be that there is no institutional recognition of activism (there is no organizations or entities “hiring activists”, there are no ceremonies or events exclusively for LGBT+ activists), so there is no point of reference or discursive space to include people doing activism.

One exception from all the interviews was found in the narrative of H11 who has been a part of activism in Belarus and mediated activism in Belarusian context for almost 15 years. For H11, working now in civil society in the Global North, activism is clearly defined as work that requires recourses and should be rewarded in the end. And yet, H11 themselves points out that such comprehension of activism is present only in those civil society where there is a point of comparison between general civil participations (signing petitions, joining demonstrations, etc.) and activism as an activity that generates causes for such participation. “In the West the identity politics is extremely important. If you say that you have a voice, you need to be visible, you need to be a part of agenda for the day. And this struggle for recognition is a crucial social component. In Belarus… for many people it will be more important to do something, without calling it activism”.

When I have asked about vocations and rest, several activists laughed during the interviews. “No, I don’t have vocations or days off. But you understand, with this lifestyle: work, studies, activism – there is no space for that. I have made my decision” (QV). As for most of the interviewees, activism is not included in the category of work, the inquiry about vocation, burn-out prevention or days-off in many cases was seen ludicrous. According to the self-reports from activists, only three activists working within the same organization have some system of self-care and support of their wellbeing, the rest has been very resistant in recognizing the issue. As an example, to the question: “Do you encounter burnout in your activism due to extensive use of social media?” – the reply would be: “No, I haven’t encountered burnout”, however, later, when I would ask another question: “But do you feel tired?” – the reply would be: “I feel tired every day, I had depression during the whole winter, but I need to continue” (UW).
It doesn’t come as a surprise then, that those of the individuals who haven’t identified burnout or haven’t named any tools to prevent it, report major disruptions in their normal flow of life. Among the results of extensive use of social media for mediated activism individuals have reported necessity of deleting pages due to stress, leaving social media, having nightmares and panic attacks, having nervous breakdowns and shock. All these results are seen by the activists as negative interference in their activities, and for many the most appropriate way to cope with them it “to overcome and move forward” (L8). Private psychotherapy in Belarus is still a very exclusive and luxurious service that cannot be afforded by many of interviewees, and governmental psychotherapy brings all the risks associated with preventive reporting and social repressions.

However, there are several cases when social media are used precisely to ask for help: for LD and W5P their personal pages serve as safer space to articulate their emotional vulnerability. “I’m trying to focus on emotional reflection. It is very important for me to be vulnerable, I’m tired of trying to be strong. I want to talk about negative emotions, about pain, fear, loneliness and sadness” (LD). LD and W5P are close colleague and friends who belong to the organization with awareness to well-being needs, so it might be the case that their decisions to create content related to emotions have informed each other. In terms of the topics they cover in their posts, trauma, encounters with normative environment and homophobia are the most frequent ones, and in February 2018 none of the published posts were associated with activist experience per se.

With that in mind, one should avoid simplification of the situation. This study cannot determine the origin of psychological imbalance for activists or provide with a diagnosis, however, the cross-cutting theme that has been identified in all the interviews was the distress associated with extensive usage of social media. For many individuals, the requirement to be present online on constant basis, to intervene and to interact with stressful and aggressive environment clearly was described as a factor contributing to tiredness.

Speaking from personal experience, I would suggest that one of the most influential factor that impacts the decision to continue engagement is the awareness about the size of activist community. This sentiment has been echoed by several interviewees who also recognized the issue and pointed that they couldn’t have any weekends or vocations because there would be no one to replace them. “Now I simply can’t leave, I can’t stop doing activism just because I’m tired. Everybody is tired. If everybody is tired, who will be left to do activism?” (QV).

Burnout, stress, declining mental health are only parts of price paid by the activists for the social change they are trying to achieve. The mediatized actions that are rooted in shrinking space for civil society, fear of repressions, low interest and endangering contributions to agenda of resistance are trying to find small gaps between normative discourses and closing borders of
Belarusian political structures and influence on specific groups or people in more careful, “soft” way. Many interviewees highlighted that they are trying to build more lasting relations with people who read them and to change “at least one live at a time” (LD). The low scale of impact is something that was also quite often referred as a matter of frustration. While most activists explicitly said that they were doing as much as they could, many of them would like to do more if they have more physical and mental resources. The next section will explore more how identity and participation in activism are connected with two major things LGBT+ activists are pursuing: recognition of LGBT+ people and reduction of violence.

4.1.4. Social change as individual transformation

When it comes to social change in mediated activism, for many theorists it lies in the realm of the systematic political changes or, at least, progressive political decisions regarding specific social groups. The shrinking space, however, doesn’t provide with any forum for engaging in political activities. Though many interviewees have recalled dysfunctional legal mechanisms on protection of trans*gender people, or prevention of homophobia, or discrimination on workplaces and in health care as problems relevant for LGBT+ community, the overall agreement was that it isn’t worth to promote modification of the legislation, because Belarus is not a constitutional state in the first place. For LD, one of few interviewees working in more politized approach with homophobia, the nominal law doesn’t guarantee anything: “I can’t work only for a law, I can’t only talk to people who make decisions, because if there is no understanding in the society why these laws are important, my work is useless”.

The structure of political opportunities in the country is read by activists as extremely closed and aggressive to any inputs, and, thus, in Belarusian context the focus of mediated activism changes from viral organizing and then massive grassroots lobbying to sharing of information and individual transformation. All the activists have mentioned individual changes in other people (both in the LGBT+ community and outside of it) as the main goal of their activities. The individual transformation could be explored in two organizing themes: recognition of LGBT+ people and reduction of violence – and in the interviews it went hand in hand with the theme of personal identity. For LGBT+ activists in Belarus both these themes are embedded in their own experiences of living in Belarus, and by contributing to processes of progressive changes in others, they hope to change their own surroundings.
4.1.4.1. Recognition of LGBT+ people

One of the main goals of participating in risky, dangerous and socially disapproved activities, as it turned out, is the desire to change something if not on the level of the society, but at least in the nearby groups: “I don’t know if anything will change. I’m hoping that people from my circle will consider what happens on the other side” (W5P). For the overwhelming majority of interviewees, publications about their own experiences in heteronormative society or posts on LGBT+ issues are supposed to let people know about their existence and make them consider problems encountered by LGBT+ people in the country.

The actual posts about these two topics in general contain descriptions of some events and then explanation why are they problematic. From all the collected posts in February 2018, they are second most written and first most discussed. In this situation activists are trapped between two contractionary conditions: as they want to reach out to non-LGBT+ people, they need to stay visible, but too much visibility would lead to bullying and aggression. The decision taken by many is to open their personal pages, share information there and then banning all individuals who behave violently or disrespectful.

The main goal of sharing personal information, according to the interviewees, is to claim public space, to prove that LGBT+ people exist. “My goal is to show that people like me have their right to exist, they exist here and now, they work, drink, eat, walk, and nothing happens” (L8). The lack of representation in Belarusian society and lack of public knowledge about issues related to gender inequality or LGBT+ issues is something that makes activist to participate in informational labour and explain the most basic things over and over. For YQ who is in activism for the last 5 years, it became very frustrating, and she decided to focus on other aspects of recognition: “I’m bored to talk about issues that are obvious to me, I don’t participate in that anymore. Right now, I want intersections, I want to talk about interconnectivity of identities, experiences, values…”.

The theme of recognition in general is defined as a personalized process by the activists, and mostly they agree that changing mind of one individual is a sufficient social change. As it was explained by the interviewees, the general problem in Belarus is detachment between people and lack of spaces to build up social connections, and, thus, using social media is one way to develop comprehension among non-affiliated individuals of what happens with LGBT+ people.

4.1.4.2. Reduction of violence

Working toward recognition of LGBT+ people and their experiences, many LGBT+ activists talk about reduction of violence as a parallel process. The logic is built on the assumption that
people who know LGBT+ individuals and who are aware about existing systems of oppression would be more empathetic to the community, and, thus, by sharing personal and communal experience of homophobia activists can achieve this goal. This strategy may have its own unexpected strengths: ZB who doesn’t call herself an LGBT+ activist, but sympathizer, came into partisan practice of defending LGBT+ individuals on social media precisely because her close friend told her about his experience of being prosecuted because of his homosexuality. Lived-through experiences and verbalized memories of violence are very impactful tools to reach out to other activists as well: AX has found supporters (and many more haters) for trans*gender rights, after he shared how does it feel like being a trans*gender person in Belarus.

As it was discussed in the section on heteronormativity, violence plays a significant role in being both an activist, and an LGBT+ individual, so it doesn’t come as a surprise that in many cases activists are trying to reduce violence against themselves and people like them, and only then touch upon other groups. Here, as well as in many other themes, the cooperation with the legal system or the government are absent: apart from LD, none of the activists expressed that they find work toward implementation of hate-crime laws or any other laws regarding LGBT+ efficient. The posts and produced texts are more oriented toward individuals with a purpose to explain basic respect to human rights.

Both these two interconnecting themes can be used to argue that mediated activism which in politically open or semi-open context is used for promotion of human rights issues and then lobbying appropriate solutions in Belarus is used for completely different set of reasons. While the social change demanded after viral organizing often implies deep shifts in power system, the social change coming from personal activities asks for connectedness between oppressed individuals and other people deprived from power. One of the most blatant explanation of such horizon of imagining change might be the complete stagnation of political landscape in Belarus, lack of opportunities to engage in it, immense repressions that follow any non-normative participation, and extensive social pressure that is put to silence problems related to LGBT+.

And though the political system is deaf to activists, some changes in the mediated spaces are happening, and it would be unfair to the activists and their work to deny or to reduce importance of individual oriented enlightenment. Since January 2018, several major independent online media have provided with space for activists to write on trans* and gay rights. The chief editors of two portals relevant for Minsk are participating in discussion on Facebook started by the activists on homophobia, and generally more people comment upon those issues. With that said, we will proceed with discussion on the finding from netnographical study to see how the strategy of reaching to one person at a time working for LGBT+ activists and how exactly they use it.
4.2. Netnography

In February 2018, while working on three jobs, being constantly stressed and assaulted in the mediated spaces, 8 activists whose personal pages were open for public have managed to produce 34 posts on Facebook. From 13 interviewees, 2 individuals, as expected, didn’t post anything on their personal profiles due to risk of preventive reporting from colleagues, and 3 other activists who stated that they use Facebook for activist activity didn’t publishing anything on their own pages, but participated in the discussions on LGBT+ issues on personal pages of other activists during the month. It is worth mentioning that while the sample might have seemed too narrow, I have decided not to enlarge it, as the purpose of doing netnographical analysis instead of content analysis was to get a sense of dynamics inside the community and understand processes that are happening within mediated activism in addition to testimonies from the interviews. These two aspects could be identified on a one-month sample, and because there was no initial aspiration to make a statistically generalized conclusion, I have proceed working with 34 posts.

It also might be precisely the case that activists don’t produce many posts due to their work overload and risks related to activism. As it has been previously discussed, activists use their personal non-working time (early mornings, lunches and late evenings) to publish posts which, and, in this case, it is entirely possible that there are simply not enough resources to write more.

The initial assumption that activists would try to relate their activities online to the Day of Fatherland Defenders’ turned out to be quite inaccurate, and two other dates played more vital role in talking about LGBT+ agenda in February. The Saint Valentines’ Day (February 13th) and One Billion Rising Flash Mob (February 14th) were used as entries into talking about heteronormativity and violence against LBT+ women. However, even on this occasions that give possibility to reach out to non-affiliated individuals, activists didn’t use any hashtags or other indicators that could have assisted with viral organizing.

The first peculiar detail of how activists use their personal pages to talk about LGBT+ is the origin of posts and their types. Half of the posts (18 cases) were written by the activists themselves, then there was a part of reposts from public pages on LGBT+ (10 cases) and post written by other people to pages of activists (6 cases). No reposts from other activists were identified, and that might relate to the type of produced content. On most occasions (14 cases), the activists would post a link and then add a commentary (typically within the limit of one paragraph) about this link. The commentary posts are most often to encounter on personal pages (see Diagram 1). Only in 6 posts (analytical and emotional types) activists would write an elaborated text dedicated to a specific topic within LGBT+ agenda with a personal picture, and those posts would be shared and
liked generally more than others. Video appeared the least popular medium, and that could be easily explained with the amount of time that should be invested into making it.

In many cases it was difficult to determine what type of narration activists used to talk about LGBT+ related issues. As in the interviews almost everyone stated that they are speaking in their own voice, one would imagine that posts on social media would reflect this statement, and post with personal or personalized narration (stories about oneself or others) would build the majority of the cases. From 34 cases, 21 posts were written with unidentified actor of speaking, and, if one considers the fact, that all these posts were commentary, it seems only logical to expect that they wouldn’t be too popular among the public. Posts with personalized or personal narration that would fall into categories of emotional or analytical types were the most popular. In other words, when activists would write about themselves or LGBT+ individuals around them and then describe the situation more, people would share, comment and like these posts.

Hashtags that are widely used to relate posts on the same topic to each other and help people to search for content on specific occasion in viral organizing were almost not used at all. Only in 7 posts activists would use hashtags and those were covering either general LGBT+ rights issues, or local campaigns on LGBT+ rights that were used only by the activists themselves. The most obvious explanation of low engagement of other individuals here is that there are no campaigns that would encourage people to contribute with personalized content, and the risks for participating or write under hashtags with open LGBT+ agenda are too high. When the campaign touches upon issues of general discrimination based on various categories, people are more willingly contribute to it. In March, for example, MakeOut, the portal on gender and sexuality, has launched a campaign #zerodiscriminationday with a frame for profile pictures which was widely used among activists and non-affiliated individuals.

Together with absent hashtags, calls to action were not found in any of the analyses posts. In all the posts, even in those where activists would elaborate on violence, homophobia, heteronormativity or any other social issue, they would tend to describe the problem, their personal
attitude toward it, and then in some cases they would ask for comfort or support, but mostly no calls for any type of action would be formulated. When it comes to sharing posts that clearly narrate about a general social problem (violence or resulted trauma), the sharing rate would be extremely low, and generally posts written by the activists wouldn’t be shared, as a result of risks associated with connection to LGBT+ community.

When it comes to topics that were discussed in posts, heteronormativity elaborated as expectations, demands, and experience of queer resistance was marked as the most frequent (16 cases, see Diagram 2). In the posts coded with heteronormativity, activists would tell about their own experiences, and then quite often rich discussions would grow in the comment sections where other individuals, and especially other activists would exchange their stories. From this perspective, posts on heteronormativity were used to discuss violence, trauma and healing in the comment section and were operating as forums, though none of these topics were mentioned in the original posts. Hate-crime / discrimination / violence as a topic also appeared to be one of the most frequent (13 cases). These three phenomena were gathered in one topic, because during the analysis it became clear that when activists talk about discrimination, they proceed with talking about violence and hate-crime as its results. It is quite interesting that the topic of homophobia wasn’t mentioned in some of the posts on violence, and in general homophobia covered more generalized problems, such as attitudes or stereotypes, and the combination of heteronormativity and homophobia was encountered more often than homophobia and violence.

In some instances, heteronormativity and homophobia were paired with education which was expected. As for many activists the way to work with social issues lies in the culture and education, by using these topics and then offering opportunity to join a training or visit an event, they would promote nonviolent peaceful individual transformation.

![Diagram 2: Topics in the posts](image-url)
Activism or political participation would be used only by those activists who are present in the field for at least 4 years, and these individuals would also touch upon topics of isolation / lack of solidarity.

In general, the results of netnographical observations provided with additional evidences to support findings of the interviews. The risks of being associated with LGBT+ community outweighed the good will to spread the word for non-affiliated individuals, and the commenting happens much more often than sharing. The excessive workload limited the possibility for activists to produce original content or participate in viral organizing, and it has also influenced on the tools available for content production. Heteronormativity, violence and homophobia debuted as most prominent topics to write about, and it is only logical considering problems that are encountered by LGBT+ individuals in Belarus.

With that said, one might wonder about the actual scope of mediated activism on LGBT+ issues. If the impact is so small and the amount of produced texts is so little, does it even make a difference, whether activists publish anything or not? It is essential to understand that thought the impact might seem small, the mediated spaces provide with something that is not available in any institutionalized entities in Belarusian context: it gives an opportunity to talk and to be heard by others. The way other individuals and activists use posts as a safe forum for discussions and experiences sharing only highlights this: activists are using social media not to influence on the government, but to connect with each other and build trustworthy relations within LGBT+ community which for many years was extremely detached. And maybe this should be considered as a first step of organizing: when presented with a proper opportunity, activists might use this emotional connection with others as an entry point for further mobilization and politicized actions.

5. Concluding Remarks

The current study has started from curiosity to learn to what extent mediated activism and online social media can play a role in progressive social change, when it comes to marginalized groups. While many scholars in European context have put high hopes onto social media in terms of their potential to connect and to mobilize individuals for further political actions, this study cannot join the list of works proving this assumption and promoting it without critical address.

In the beginning of the theoretical journey, five concepts: identity, collective/connective action, mediated activism, shrinking civil society space and structure of political opportunities – were introduced to set the discussion about mediated activism in Belarus. During the study, these concepts were examined in relation to experiences of practicing mediated activism, and it became clear that to speak about mediated activism in a sensitive matter and address hidden power
dynamics, one should try to establish interactive links between these terms. As it was analysed in the empirical data, the notion of identity for the LGBT+ activists and the way they unpack its meaning for themselves heavily influence and is influenced by the examples of collective/connective actions around. The specific practices of mediated activism are extremely dependent of social spaces and mechanisms of repressions there, and these practices are constantly being negotiated in the shrinking civil society space with its limited political opportunities. While on the theoretical level these concepts include potential for positive change and mobilization, the empirical data of the research cannot embody this aspiration.

In fact, as it was found in the current research, in the restrictive spaces mediated activism and social media, instead of serving as tools for mass outreach and mobilization, are serving completely different function: they endanger activists engaged in LGBT+ issues. Burnout, risk of poverty, emotional and physical assaults, and exposure to repressive sanctions are happening to activists because of their presence online, and there are extremely limited tools to combat these consequences of being public. It is still an open question whether these risks could have been mitigated or they would have escalated, if mediated activists would stick only to organizing events in physical spaces. Because of the risks, when it comes to shared identities and mobilization, not much is happening, as people hesitate to join socially sanctioned activities or speak up about their marginalized experiences, knowing the possible negative outcome of such actions. The backlash is mostly formed by the hegemonic heteronormative discourse around, supported and promoted by the whole apparatus of state institutions that provide with wide range of instruments for regular citizens to report, prevent, crash and damage any attempts to modify dominating power structures.

As it comes from the empirical results, the shrinking space and limited political opportunities outweigh the potential of online social media, lower their impact and determine prospects of social change in such a way, when viral organizing or structural transformations become extremely limited. When system cannot be modified, then the only way to change the society around is to start with grass-roots and build up individual comprehension of why equality, respect, and diversity matter. With that in mind, activists try to speak about their personal experience of oppression and create safe spaces online, where these experiences can be heard and discussed. As these actions fall out from typically recognized activism, the adoption of activist identity which is also marginalized and has its own negative connotations becomes extremely problematic and requires acknowledgement from others in the field. Though these posts don’t serve as a basis for further political action, they help to achieve visibility for the community, as other media outlets are hesitant or incapable to cover LGBT+ agenda in sensitive and respectful manner. By
discussing, explaining, and connecting individuals one by one, activists are hoping to achieve more diverse society and reduce violence directed toward LGBT+ community.

Will this goal ever be achieved? It is extremely hard to give any solid forecast for mediated activism in Belarus, if one hopes for new developments in the political landscape in the upcoming presidential elections. With a major change in the political landscape or a sudden political opportunity, as it happened during spring of 2018 in Georgia and Armenia, the LGBT+ community could become more vocal and engaged in the transformation of the society through social media. It might be the case that if the prosecutions of LGBT+ people will continue, the community will take more active stance against discrimination and will use the prepared basis in the social media for further mobilization.

The transformative structural change is not happening overnight, and the steps that are made by the LGBT+ community in Belarus are first steps on the way of more pluralistic agenda for the society. With more people involved, these changes might spread faster and maybe one day they will achieve the ideal form of connective actions.
6. References


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Appendix A, interview guide

Set 1: personal story
1. Could you, please, tell me a bit about yourself. Who are you, where are you from, who do you do? (Ask specifically about age, class, place of origin, if not mentioned by the interviewee)
2. Do you identify yourself as an activist? Why?
3. How do you think, what can influence on person’s decision to consider themselves an activist or not?
4. How does your identity as an activist affect your relations with family, friends, colleagues?
5. What do you do as an activist?
6. Do you use online social media in your activism? Is it the major tool you use or a complimentary one?
7. Could you give couple examples in which cases do you use online social media?
8. If we go in more details about your usage of social media, how do you feel, did the way you use social media help you or, maybe, on the contrary, prevent you from identifying as an activist?
9. When you participate in the mediated activism, do you use your own identity (personal pages, personal profile) or you create a separate account?
10. If we talk about mediated activism and in-field activities, how would you describe their relative advantages or disadvantages?

Set 2: social change + mediated activism
1. Could we go into more details regarding your usage of social media for activist purpose? Do you use laptop or mobile phone? What platforms do you use? What platforms do you avoid? What influences on this choice?
2. Are you using only your personal page to cover LGBT+ related issues or you have another public page?
3. What topics do you touch upon in your posts? Why these specific topics are important to you? What topics do you avoid?
4. In your activism, do you represent the whole LGBT+ community or you are more connected with a specific group inside the community, for example, lesbian, trans* or queer?
5. Which means or media (text, illustrations, performances, etc.) do you use to spread information on your private page? What do you use most of all?
6. Are you engaged in social media promotion in your organization/initiative?
7. If we talk about your usage of social media as a part of your activism, what kind of change are you hoping to achieve with them?
8. How do you think, does this extensive usage of social media impact your well-being or burn-out? If so, how did you cope with it?
9. Are there any other activists whom you consider important to talk to for the current research? Could you share their details?
### Appendix B, thematic analysis guide

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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2. Being an impostor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2.3. Recognition from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.1. Intersectionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.2. Public figures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>3.3. Speaking about one-self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “other” activism</td>
<td>1. Triple Labor</td>
<td>1.1. Work overload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Burnout</td>
<td>1.2. Financial instability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3. Part-time / full-time jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.4. Activism as “hobby”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1. Emotional distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2. Psychotherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3. Psychological disorders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social change as individual</td>
<td>1. Recognition of LGBT+ people</td>
<td>1.1. Respect to human rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transformation</td>
<td>2. Reduction of violence</td>
<td>1.2. Respect to LGBT+ people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3. Normalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.4. Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1. Reduction of physical assaults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2. Reduction of online harassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3. Legislative protection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

61 Snizhko
Appendix C, thematic analysis map
Appendix D, netnographic colour-coding

Я не вижу никакой проблемы в том, что люблю девушек. Если какие-то люди в этом проблему видят, лучше им узнать эту правду обо мне пораньше. Бывает, что на фейсбуке, когда это приходится к слову по теме поста, я пишу: «Всё, гомофобы, отпишитесь от меня сейчас, плиз». Потому что неприятно, когда мои «типа френды» сначала шлют мне радостные гифки в день рождения, а потом постят на своих стенах гомофобскую срань. Хорошо, когда лицо показывают сразу.
По ссылке продолжение. Спасибо за интервью.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link to the post</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of publishing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of publishing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origin of post</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Created by the individual</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Repost connected with LGBT+ issues from other individuals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Repost connected with LGBT+ issues from other public pages</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Post to page (user posted to the page of the activist, or post appeared because the activist is mentioned)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of content</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Text</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Picture + text</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Video</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Text + link</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of post</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Commentary</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Analytical post (comparison between different points of view, answers to the question &quot;why&quot;)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Emotional post (narrates about emotional state, answers to the question &quot;how&quot;)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Announcement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of narration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Personal story (about the activist themselves)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personified story (about someone else than the activist)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. De-personalized (about social processes or events)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Can't be determined</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hashtags</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Hashtags related to LGBT+ campaigns</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hashtags related to LGBT+ rights, not affiliated to specific campaigns</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. No hashtags</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topics in the post (colour of coding)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Hatecrime / discrimination / violence (yellow)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Homophobia (pink)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Heteronormativity (blue)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Trauma / burnout (orange)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Healing / self-care / therapy / support (green)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Intimate relations with people, including sex (red)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Isolation / lack of solidarity (black)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Education / improvement of skills (purple)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Activism / political participation (brown)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Feedback from other users**

| 1. Comments | 151 |
| 2. Reactions (like, wow, love, etc.) | 795 |
| 3. Shares | 11 |