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## Male homosexuality and homophobia in contemporary Slovakia: A qualitative inquiry into personal online narratives

**ABSTRACT.** Homosexuality in Slovakia is covered in a veil of secrecy. With constant attacks by the Catholic Church and populist, traditionalist politicians, it is barely visible in society and politics, unless when discursively attacked. Similarly, homosexuality in Slovakia has failed to become a topic in the contemporary academia, with the exception of a few local works. This article, aiming to fill that gap, confronts a selection of online narratives of Slovak homosexuals via Qualitative Data Analysis through the qualitative tool, QDA Miner, including narrative analysis. Additionally, having in mind the strong propaganda of the Catholic Church against homosexuality, select homophobic narratives are analyzed via the same means.

**KEYWORDS:** Slovakia, homosexuality, QDA analysis, narratives

### Introduction

In this article, we are exploring the experiences of a number of male homosexuals in Slovakia via methodological paradigms of qualitative inquiry; namely, qualitative data analysis and content analysis, on a corpus of personal narratives of male Slovak homosexuals available online. In a rare article about the topic of homosexuality in Slovakia, Wallace-Lorencova wrote how 'the emerging visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-identified people is a contested story in Slovakia's post-socialist transformations, one that continues to be absent from contemporary academic examinations of Eastern Europe' (Wallace-Lorencová, 2003, p. 103); since 2003, the situation has not changed much due to the general lack of interest in Slovakia. Indeed, homosexuality in Slovakia has failed to engage scholars on a global level. The only research so far has been conducted

by a relatively small number of Slovak scholars (Heretik & Novotný, 2003; Kobes, 2011; Ondrisová et al., 2002; Seidl, 2006), none of them coming from a qualitative orientation, and some even from an eldritch religious perspective (Keefe, 2000). Segueing thus into questions of religion, the staunch Catholicism of Slovakia can be said to present a significant problem for a wider social acceptance of homosexuality in Slovakia, including local scholarly research, as shall be seen in the analysis to come. Homosexuals in Slovakia are a silent minority, struggling with their daily experiences of homosexual arousal and lack of opportunity for togetherness and inclusion. It has to be noticed that while male homosexual narratives are available on the World Wide Web, female homosexuality – lesbianism – suffers from even a larger lack of visibility (both within the country and in the Ivory Towers), including transgender people, yet this will be the core of another research article in the near future.

## Methodology

As qualitative researchers have been made aware, and as qualitative researchers has been writing for almost two decades, ‘recently, concerns about validity in qualitative research have increased’ (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 319); many have responded onto those allegations, leading to an increased production in qualitative theory. Nevertheless, ‘a lot of effort has been expended by methodologists over the years, trying to give some guidance to qualitative researchers in improving or judging the quality of qualitative research’ (Seale, 1999, p. 465). Among other methodologies, since 1999, Qualitative Data Analysis seemed to have stepped up to the task. QDA was, at a point, called the ‘black hole of qualitative research’ (Lather & Lather, 1991, p. 149), yet this was over a quarter of a century ago. In the meantime, QDA has been strengthened by digital tools, allowing a new resurgence of qualitative analysis, as ‘development in digital tools in qualitative research over the past 20 years has been driven by the development of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) and the Internet’ (Davidson, Paulus, & Jackson, 2016, p. 1). Among a plethora of available tools, we shall be using QDA Miner (Derobertmeasure & Robertson, 2014; Lewis & Maas, 2007), a valuable utility for a qualitative researcher, one that allows both textual input and several modes of analysis that allows also for several modes of quantitative research, making it fall under the mixed (hybrid) methods designation,

since ‘the deployment of a qualitative methodology does not rule out the use of qualitative methods’ (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 456). Among this slew of relevant instances, however, *coding* is key to qualitative analysis conducted via QDA Miner.

A coded unit is “a segment of content that is to be considered a basic unit for purposes of categorization and frequency measurement,” (Bardin, 2001, p. 135), whilst to ‘code data, then, one must assume that words textualized in interview transcripts and field notes are not only data but also brute data that can be broken apart and decontextualized by coding—even using existing coding schemes from others’ research projects. Once coded, words can be sorted into categories and then organized into “themes” that somehow naturally and miraculously “emerge” as if anyone could see them’ (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 716).

Following the emerging paradigm and recently made available tools, we shall investigate personal narratives of Slovak male homosexuals found on the World Wide Web, via engaging into qualitative data analysis (mixed with quantitative data) and content analysis of the given corpus of text. As we are analyzing narratives/stories, we are bound to understand that ‘stories are fundamental to our sense-making, to making our lives meaningful, and to what drives our hearts. In the stories we tell, we discover ourselves and each other’ (Pelias, 2015, p. 609). These stories are part of larger discourses, which can be broadly defined as ‘habits of interpretation distributed through communities that frame experiences, objects, and events in particular ways. These discourses can be said to constitute experiences insofar as they make the experiences legible and meaningful, thus available for comment, discussion, and reference’ (Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014, p. 730), having in mind that ‘the materiality of our bodies, along with our capacity to produce symbols through communication, combine to constitute stories that can be analyzed to learn more about identities’ (Jones Jr, 2015, p. 767).

Having also in mind that we are engaging a discriminated, silenced group, whose voices have been stifled in a Communist-cum-Catholic environment, we are aware that ‘critical qualitative research for the future requires unthought collaborations and explorations with traditionally marginalized knowledges and ways of being as lenses from which to literally reconceptualize research as construct’ (Cannella, 2015, p. 3).

When it comes to the question of the corpus of research at hand, much can be said about its breadth, as ‘we can only code what is actually said, which is a severe constraint on a researcher’s ability to interpret the sig-

nificance of social dynamics. When research locates meaning only in what is actually said, expressed, or done, then the absence of expressions, gestures, and voice is tacitly framed as meaningless. Silences, however, are not always meaningless. Silences can be produced by imbalanced power dynamics, such as when a student never mentions he or she has same sex parents for fear of harassment and being ostracized' (Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014, p. 727). Thus, even the smallest of corpora can provide an insight into the chosen topic, especially nowadays, within the contemporary digital environment, as many researchers have stressed the importance of on-line spaces in relation to homosexuality (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005; Rosenmann & Safir, 2006).

Additionally, we shall inquire into the Catholic opposition to homosexuality via engaging the same type of sources: online accessible narratives of alleged 'healed' homosexuals, who have, according to the sources, been 'cured' of homosexuality via their faith in Christ. This is a relevant addition, especially having in mind the strength of the Catholic propaganda against homosexuality, and it will show the main instances in religion-based opposition to homosexuality that will show itself reported by the initial narratives of Slovak homosexuals, as in societies 'where traditional values are dominant, LGBT rights are hardly considered important' (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017, p. 3).

### The socio-political context

In general, homosexuality in Slovakia is a matter of secrecy, undebated and hidden. Homophobia is present – stemming commonly from the Church and Right Wing political parties – including a 2000 spread of leaflets that promoted 'homocilin', an imaginary 'cure' for homosexuality that is 'guaranteed to cure homosexuality' (Wallace-Lorencová, 2003, p. 103), playing into the Christian Democratic Party's dominant discourses. The accent needs to be put on the 'Christian' part of the party's designation, as 'condemnation of homosexual behavior by the Catholic Church has found a fertile ground in contemporary Slovakia, where 69% of adult citizens identify as Roman Catholics' (Wallace-Lorencová, 2003, p. 104). Catholicism has been connected to instances of severe homophobia in a slew of scholarly works relating to a vast geographical array (Cerbone & Danzer, 2017; Frawley-O'Dea & Goldner, 2016; Hilliard, 1982; Reygan & Moane, 2014; Ward, 2015), while Slovakia is known to be under the strong in-

fluence of Catholicism, which is 'linked historically with the quasi-fascist Slovak state during the Second World War' (Benda & Wilson, 1985); the heteronormative attitude towards homosexuality has not changed during Czechoslovakia's later drift into Communism. Nonetheless, whilst the Czech Republic, after the breakup of Czechoslovakia, became significantly more liberal (Hamplová & Nešpor, 2009), as well as secular/atheistic (Lužný & Navrátilová, 2001; Spousta, 2002), Slovakia still boasts significant religiosity, especially when compared with its former state counterpart, the Czech Republic. On the other hand, the non-parliamentary Right Wing has been active in the creation and dissemination of homophobic discourses (there was a slew of such parties/groups during the last few decades, such as *Slovenská pospolitost', Slovenská ľudova strana, Nové slobodné Slovensko, Slovenská národná jednota, Jednota slovenskej mladeže, Stropkovská stráž, Slovenské hnutie obrody*). These are the environments and spaces which homosexuals in Slovakia are forced to navigate on a daily basis; by engaging some of their personal narratives, we can get insight into the most salient of issues they face.

In 2005, *The Slovak Spectator* published an editorial about homosexuality in Slovakia, saying that, even though homosexuality in Slovakia is legal since 1960, 'twenty to thirty years ago, there were officially no homosexuals in Slovakia. At least, that was how the Communist regime treated them. Homosexuals did not exist; they were simply a "product" of the Western world, which, according to party line, was spiralling into chaos and self-destruction. In general, homosexuality remains taboo. For gays, it would be very difficult to live openly in most Slovak towns or villages' (Balogová, 2005), and the situation has not changed much in the meantime, with the exception of a Gay Pride event in 2010. In 2014, 'Slovakia's Christian Democrats teamed up with the governing left-populist party, "Smer" ("Direction" in Slovak) of Prime Minister Robert Fico to pass a constitutional amendment to "protect the Slovak family," vaguely reminiscent of the infamous Defense of Marriage Act, overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court last year. Since this past September, the Constitution of Slovakia thus stipulates that "marriage is a union solely between man and woman. The Slovak Republic fully protects marriage and provides all means to secure its wellbeing"' (Rohac, 2014). In 2017, homosexuality is still seen by some as a 'perversion' (ČTK, 2017), even though LGBT rights are protected legally. This is a common case in a vast number of countries, where, even though officially, the state protects the rights of homosexuals, in practice, these rights are seldom enforced by the state.

## Coding research results

Eight narratives concentrating on personal experiences *of* homosexuals *about* homosexuality and their own lived experiences have been coded by three categories:

- 1) tropes (motives);
- 2) feelings, and
- 3) actions.

As subdivisions, tropes were coded into the following sub-categories:

- 1.1 religion,
- 1.2 heterosexuality,
- 1.3 admission (of being homosexual), and
- 1.4 prejudice (against homosexuality),
- 2.1 fear,
- 2.2 attraction (to a person of the same sex),
- 2.3 suffering,
- 2.4 desire for a homosexual relation,
- 2.5 being in love,
- 2.6 confusion,
- 3.1 coming out,
- 3.2 sex,
- 3.3 porn,
- 3.4 masturbation,
- 3.5 (engaging) Internet,
- 3.6 encounter (with another homosexual).

The above were chosen due to their iteration and consequential relevance to the narratives based on the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2017; Suddaby, 2006).

Table 1. Case, word and code percentages

Category	Code	Count	Codes [%]	Cases	Cases [%]	Nb Words	Words [%]
tropes	religion	5	8.8	2	25.0	23	0.5
tropes	heterosexuality	6	10.5	4	50.0	57	1.3
tropes	admission	2	3.5	2	25.0	9	0.2
tropes	prejudice	1	1.8	1	12.5	1	0.0
feelings	fear	1	1.8	1	12.5	4	0.1
feelings	attraction	9	15.8	6	75.0	175	3.9

feelings	suffering	1	1.8	1	12.5	2	0.0
feelings	desire for hom. relation	4	7.0	2	25.0	15	0.3
feelings	being in love	3	5.3	2	25.0	6	0.1
feelings	confusion	1	1.8	1	12.5	1	0.0
actions	coming out	1	1.8	1	12.5	3	0.1
actions	sex	6	10.5	5	62.5	370	8.3
actions	porn	6	10.5	4	50.0	23	0.5
actions	masturbation	6	10.5	3	37.5	6	0.1
actions	internet	2	3.5	2	25.0	8	0.2
actions	encounter	3	5.3	2	25.0	12	0.3

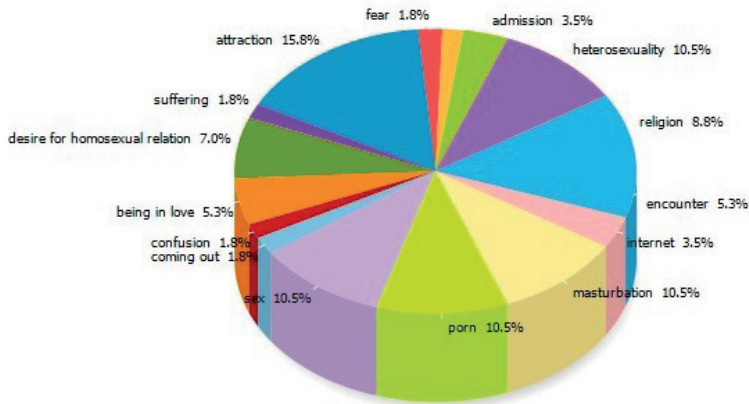


Figure 1. Distribution of codes (frequency)

As seen in table 1 and figure 1, several instances overshadow the others, such as a strong emphasis on attraction, which was seen in 15.8% of the coded material, as well as sex, pornography and masturbation, that appear together in 31.5% of the narratives. The Code Frequency additionally revealed that sex, masturbation and porn were, unsurprisingly, sequentially linked to each other. Sex *per se* leads the list of the most salient of topics within the eight narratives.

Going into content analysis of the coded material above, more can be revealed. Religion figured as a stifling factor in several of the narratives. In Narrative nr. 5, we see an admission that, since the subject was coming from a religious family, 'I had to keep it all a secret'. He continues to say that, since he came from a religious societal background, 'I lived through inner conflicts and kept asking myself why boys attract me instead of

girls, I did not know how to explain it to myself ... this was strengthened by the fact that socialism was still present, and that topic was a societal taboo, nobody spoke about it in public, but my sexual aspirations could not be overcome'. In Narrative nr. 8, we see an admission that the whole society, including the Church, was the reason for secrecy, as 'in movies, homosexuals are always depicted as men in latex ... the reality is entirely different', as 'the majority of homosexuals keeps their orientation a secret in front of the society. The Church. The inheritance. People around you ... we are seen as sick and disgusting'. As Purnell wrote on the same topic from the point of view of the hidden homosexual, 'as he feels new desires growing inside of him, desires that are forbidden and sinful according to everyone in his life, he is driven into hiding due to the shame culture in which he lives' (Purnell, 2016, p. 1). The religious environment seems like an ineluctable hindrance for accepting homosexuality in Slovakia on a broader, societal level.

*Secrecy* was also stressed several times. Narrative nr. 2 speaks about how 'we agreed to a second secret meetup. It was secret for me, as nobody knew about me before'. The construction 'knew about me', meaning 'knew about my homosexuality', without directly referencing it, speaks to the importance of secrecy, as the narrator himself seems to have succumbed to the necessity of clandestineness. When confronted by another gay man, one of the subjects claimed 'Sorry, but this is not for me. I like girls. I like them and I want to have a classical family. My girl, and soon, children', in fear of being outed by another homosexual. The necessity for secrecy overpowered even the subject's personal desire to engage in homosexual relations.

The coding analysis results given by QDA Miner, however, speak to the fact that the narratives at hand did not concentrate as much as one would expect on the negative aspects of a homosexual daily experience in Slovakia, such as the need for secrecy or suffering. To the contrary: most of them emanate an aura of hope. The most important issues seen in the narratives (see: table 1, figure 1) are attraction, sex, porn and masturbation. World-view negativity was overshadowed by a thoroughly positive view, in which concentration on personal sexual issues was stressed.

Using the Ochiai's coefficient for coding co-occurrences, figure 2 shows us the connection of masturbation, the desire for homosexual relation, porn, and even heterosexuality, as several cases reported experimenting with heterosexuality.





gious orientation, engage in a specific discourse in which homosexuality is presented as a disease, with alleged narratives of those who have managed to 'cure' themselves, such as the Mojpribeh.sk ('My story'), in which several allegedly 'cured' homosexuals claim that their 'disease' has been 'cured' via finding faith and accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior. An excursion into these discourses enables us to better comprehend the spaces which homosexuals need to navigate, the hostile environment in which they live. It is impossible to corroborate the veracity of these narratives and divulge whether they are just propaganda, or perhaps simply invented. We can use this platform to implore other scholars to research into this direction; for now, the question remains conjecture.

The character of Jozef Demian tells how 'in childhood, I had been sexually molested by an older man, I went through poverty, occultism, depressions, sexual partners of the same sex, as well as attempts of suicide. The light was brought into my life by the faith in Jesus Christ'. As seen, homosexuality is further negatively stressed by framing it within a context of poverty, occultism and suicide. 'My confused longings and the reality that men attracted me, led me towards thinking of myself as "gay" since I was twelve. I began a sexual life with an older man, with whom I have been for several years ... it was never love, only a purely physical relation'. The putting of 'gay' in parenthesis is a further stress of the 'unnatural' view of homosexuality, as well as presenting a homosexual relation as purely physical. The religious within the text overshadowed everything else:

As I was thinking about everything, it became clear to me that homosexuality prevented me from finding my true inner identity, as if everything was all about it. In the sense, evil he produces evil. But God has shown me the truth, about myself and me as a human being, that I am sinful and I need of His grace—that is what one does not deserve, it is a gift from God. And the truth is that he created a man and a woman, not anything third, or I do not know how many. Imagine that there are only homosexual relationships in the world, for a few years life on earth would be lost. God said in his word: Be fruitful and multiply ... and this is God's plan for man ... I have accepted the identity I have in Christ—I am a man. We cannot see the truth when we are blinded ... Sin conceals the truth. God touched my heart and showed me what is inside of me and I was crying. I have seen dirt, sin ... I confessed to Jesus that I was deceived by sin.

At the end, he 'admits' that 'thanks to Jesus Christ', he was 'free' from a conglomerate comprising 'homosexuality and other addictions that I mentioned, marijuana, alcohol, drugs, occult practices'.

The religious discourse about 'healing' and reverting from homosexuality was significantly easier to code, as the vast majority of the discourse simply engaged in expounding alleged negative connotations and religious faith as the solution. Thus, we have engaged the following codes:

1. 'Healing' from homosexuality / homosexuality represented as a sickness
2. Changing to heterosexuality
3. Importance of family ('family values')
4. Religion
5. Heteromascularity
6. Being molested by homosexuals / homosexuals represented as molesters
7. Heteronormative family
8. Connection of homosexuality with an array of negative instances (drugs, depression, suicide)
9. 'Unnaturalness' of homosexuality
10. Propagation of 'homosexual propaganda'

The distribution of codes is given in table 2 below, as well as on a pie chart that follows.

Table 2. Case, word and code percentages

Code	Count	Codes [%]	Cases	Cases [%]	Nb Words	Words [%]
healing from homosexuality	7	12.5	3	75.0	462	4.1
changing to heterosexuality	2	3.6	1	25.0	42	0.4
importance of family	1	1.8	1	25.0	30	0.3
religion	24	42.9	4	100.0	3854	34.4
heteromascularity	3	5.4	2	50.0	131	1.2
being molested by homosexuals	6	10.7	2	50.0	170	1.5
heteronormative family	1	1.8	1	25.0	12	0.1
connection with negative instances	8	14.3	4	100.0	282	2.5
unnaturalness of homosexuality	3	5.4	2	50.0	16	0.1
propagation of homosexual agenda	1	1.8	1	25.0	99	0.9

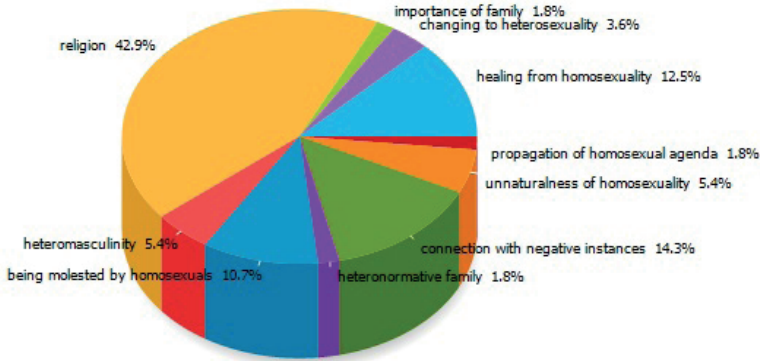


Figure 3. Distribution of codes (frequency)

As visible, religion stands as the single most used trope in the discourses on MojPribeh.sk, taking up as much as 42.9% of the coded material, with full salience in all the narratives on the webpage (four of them), 100% total. Negative connotations, such as presenting former homosexual relations as ‘being molested’ by other homosexuals, including the stress on the heteronormative family and the ‘healing’ from homosexuality fall in an important second place.

## Conclusion

Based on the research results given on the preceding pages, and taking the precarious societal position in which homosexuals find themselves in contemporary Slovakia, the following conclusions can be reached:

1. Homosexuality in Slovakia is still a taboo and cloaked in a veil of secrecy. Unlike the Czech Republic, where ‘being gay’ has become significantly less of a stigma (including a number of homosexual bars in larger cities and no problem with the local population), homophobia is still an issue in Slovakia.
2. Male homosexuals in Slovakia are still not able to ‘come out’ and ‘confess’ their sexual orientation, resorting instead to the Internet and secrecy whilst finding a partner. The Internet figures as crucial in homosexual social and romantic/sexual lives.
3. Even though visibility is low in a predominantly heteronormative space, the subjects included in this survey have seldom concentrated on the lack of visibility and societal homophobia; instead, they

chose to concentrate, in their own, personal narratives, on questions of attraction and sex.

4. The Catholic Church is seen as one of the prime promoters of homophobia and homophobic discourses, concentrating almost exclusively on the 'faith in Christ' as a 'cure' for what it considers to be a disease.

Much needs to be done to better the position of homosexuals in Slovakia. More research needs to be conducted on the societal positions and experiences of lesbians and transgender people, and we implore the scientific community to delve into these issues. When it comes to research on the former Czechoslovakian space, most research tends to concentrate on the Czech Republic, as Slovakia is often seen as the rump of the former union; this is seen not only in academic research, but in worldwide public interest, including journalism, that puts Czech Republic in the first place, with Slovakia constantly playing second fiddle. We hope that this research article will help in the breaking of a discriminative stereotype.

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