

SMALLTOWN BOYS: an exploratory study on gay men in Lombardy and their sense of place

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***ABSTRACT :** The present research aims to fill a gap in the knowledge on rural sexual minorities. It is based on an original Italian case study. The mosaic of diverse experiences that emerges from this fieldwork is extracted from qualitative data collected during interviews with gay men originating from small towns and villages in Lombardy, which centre the participants' individual perspectives with the purpose of reconstructing the way they make sense of places. Findings at times confirmed conclusions of previous scholarship, and at times contradicted them. The analysis of the relationship between the participants and their environments led to the reflection on one unusual explanation of the repulsion that certain gay men feel towards the city. This is linked to the "homonormative" character of the urban gay community that becomes more oppressive as the city emerges as a major gay-friendly hub, which, in the case of Milan, appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon. A specular reflection on a plausible "smalltown alternative" to the mainstream urban gay community, where the inclusive dimension of the community is again centred, completes the picture.*

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Literature review.....	5
2.1 The experience of rural gay men and the “urban/rural divide”	5
2.2 LGBTQ+ migration.....	8
2.3 Notes on the available Italian literature	10
3. Case study and methodology	12
3.1 Justification for the choice of the case study.....	14
3.2 The field participants.....	15
3.3 Methods.....	17
3.4 Conclusive remarks.....	19
4. Analysis and results.....	20
4.1 Gay men in relation to the place of their origin.....	20
4.2 The metropolis as an imagined place.....	25
4.3 The metropolis as an experienced place.....	29
5. Discussion.....	33
6. The city of homonormativity	40
7. The alternative to the city of homonormativity.....	45
8. Final considerations on Milan.....	51
9. Conclusion.....	54
References:	56
Appendix.....	62

1. Introduction

The conventional wisdom, but also generations of Scholars, since the works of Levine (1979) and Castells (1983) have regarded “the gay” as an inherently urban phenomenon. Such common understanding has been reinforced throughout the years by the conventional association between the word “gay” and the concept of “community”, where the latter term implicitly recalls characteristics that are distinctly urban: first of all the idea of living in the same place, exemplified by the gay “ghettos” that were the subject of Levine. As a matter of fact, the “gay community”, beyond its most visible and outstanding concentration niches in western metropolises, is widespread and dispersed across the countryside and in smaller towns. Although in recent years some research has been done on the LGBTQ+ population in rural areas, the emergence of new local communities in small towns is generally neglected beyond the boundaries of North America. Nearly all case studies are located in The United States, following the influential work of Gray (2009), which constitutes one of the first ethnographic studies of queer rural life in the US and their use of new media.

In Italy, LGBTQ+ individuals and communities have recently become significantly more visible in small provincial towns. This phenomenon, which aligns with the general trend of western societies, is also triggered by a new wave of bottom-up engagement by the younger generation. Unsurprisingly, no academic literature exists on the topic yet. It is also interesting to note that Italian literature on LGBTQ+ issues has largely focused on the question of rights, discrimination and parenthood, as highlighted in the all-encompassing interdisciplinary review made by Scarmoncin (2012). Nearly no research links the LGBTQ+ population with human geography in the Italian context, where the relation between queerness and space was never the object of significant investigation.

In most scholarship, a focus on the way that gay individuals make sense of space around them generally implies a clear-cut conceptual distinction between the “urban” and the “rural”. This is because there are stereotypical characteristics of these environments, which are themselves believed to have a generalised impact on the experiences of sexual minorities, both by conventional wisdom and scholarly literature, as shown by Wienke & Hill (2013) who explored this issue by comparing gay people's well-being in urban and in rural areas. Such conceptual distinction becomes problematic in the context of Lombardy (Italy), where a total of 40 gay men were interviewed during summer 2019 for the purpose of the present research. The fact that the Lombard provinces where participants were found are situated in proximity

of a major metropolitan area allowed the inclusion of a multiplicity of nuanced experiences in the way that people engage with the big city. This trait was functional to the purpose of the present thesis, which aims to be an exploratory study of the relationship that men of the dispersed gay community have with their place of origin versus the metropolis. Moreover, Lombardy was expected to produce a more complex and diverse narrative compared to the results that would be obtained in another region of the country particularly because it counts a number of mid-sized cities (Bergamo, Brescia, Mantova, Monza, Pavia, Varese) that in recent years have become hot-spots for the struggle for visibility of local LGBTQ+ communities dispersed in the respective provinces. The rise of LGBTQ+ activism in the small town, which combines the necessity of inclusivity with the attachment for the local territory, despite being a nationwide phenomenon, reaches its maximum density in Lombardy, where it also started earlier.

The thesis is structured as follows. First of all, part of the literature on rural sexual minorities will be briefly discussed. The review is limited to that literature that is relevant to understand the theories and hypothesis that have guided the fieldwork conducted in Lombardy, which is presented in the following chapter and discussed together with the research methods that were used. Theories of previous scholarship were crucial for the formulation of the various sub-questions that will be highlighted later. The process of the analysis and the main findings are summarised in chapter 4 and subsequently reworked and discussed more in details in chapter 5, which aims to provide concise answers to some of the question raised by scholars that are listed in chapter 3. Lastly, a few more short chapters constitute a deepening of particularly interesting phenomena or topics that emerged from fieldwork, which provide ideal ground and insights for further research.

2. Literature review

The literature that regards homosexuality as an urban phenomenon, which has been predominant in the academic debate since Levine (1979) and Castells (1983) will be omitted in the following paragraphs, where the focus will be placed instead on the rural context in relation and in contrast to the urban. The (mainly) American literature on rural sexual minorities and the literature on LGBTQ+ migration, which is mostly derived from Anglo-Saxon scholars and case studies as well, will be discussed exclusively. The review will be limited to these two bodies because they are particularly relevant for the present research. The urban/rural dichotomy might sound fragile in light of the current debate in contemporary urban studies, where the boundaries between one and the other are increasingly blurred. The following review will also illustrate how scholars have addressed and understood such dichotomy in relation to the experience of gay men. This will provide basic fundamental knowledge and different interpretations of the phenomenon that is the subject of the present research, and therefore provides useful tools to discuss the data and information gathered during the fieldwork that will be presented later.

2.1 The experience of rural gay men and the “urban/rural divide”

The mainstream narrative sees sexual minorities located in urban gay communities and thus reproduces an urban-centric discourse on how a modern gay person should be like. According to such discourse, sexual minorities should just “come out” and assimilate into gay communities and culture. The *It Gets Better* Project, a world-famous organisation whose mission is to connect LGBTQ+ youth around the globe, carries on a line that explicitly associates gay communities and urban environments. This all-over association reflects the account of many academics that have neglected the experience of gay men living in marginal settings detached from large urban areas.

Boso (2012) exposes an urban bias in the contribution of much American scholarship and in the social perception of sexual minorities. Similar claims were made even before, by Brown (2008), who asserts that sexual geographers need to expand their horizons and move beyond

this hierarchy of metropolitan gay centres, to study a broader range of sexualities and spaces in ‘ordinary cities’ (he focuses on suburban Australia). In more recent years the focus of scholars has slightly changed, but not enough, according to Gray, Johnson, & Gilley (2016) who believe that rural queer experience is still often ignored, and presumed to be alienating, lacking, and incomplete without connections to the urban gay culture. Urban bias is problematic not only because it excludes peculiar experiences from being taken into account by researchers, but also because reinforcing the belief that homosexuals do not belong to rural areas and small towns creates risk and problems for those who remain there, as shown by Boso (2012).

The first ones to link rurality and sexuality were probably Bell & Valentine (1995), who asserted that studies on rural life and lifestyles had never seriously addressed the experiences of sexual minorities. Their work considers the structural difficulties experienced by those gay men and women who are born and raised in rural areas, but also the lifestyles of those who voluntarily choose to move to country locations. However, the studies that have been done in the last two decades on rural LGBTQ+ folks mainly focus on their difficulties, as well as their experiences and imaginary.

One of the most important works on rural LGBTQ+ people was made by Gray (2009): “Out in the country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America”. The analysis was conducted in Kentucky and it shows how rural LGBT politics disrupts urban LGBT politics. (Grateman, 2011). While such communities in the popular imagination and scholarship are often positioned as “lacking” or “incomplete”, Gray’s participants and her writing about those participants’ lives illuminates the role of the familiar in rural life where “the possibility of a local family connection gives every rural resident claim to community membership”. Urban politics around LGBT visibility often refute the “familiar family” (p. 38) in favour of what might be called a “queer family,” yet Gray contends that rural LGBT youth advocates argue that “LGBT individuals deserved acknowledgement and justice as local family members and, thus, recognition as integral community constituents”.

As I said, the research on the topic of rural gay men tends to focus either on the difficulties of their experience (fragmented LGBT resources, geographical dispersion, living within a homophobic social climate..) like in Oswald (2003) and Yarbrough (2004), or on processes of sexual identity construction. Many studies highlight a clear distinction between urban and rural identities, grounded in the interpretations of geography made by the LGBTQ+ people interviewed and in what were called “elements of rural culture” by Kazyak (2011). Contrary to the common belief, one of this elements is precisely the close-knit nature of rural life

which, in the experience of Kazyak's informants, gives a different and deeper meaning to being out, visible and recognised by one's own rural community. Boso (2012) stresses how rural LGBTQ+ people negotiate cultural narratives about queerness and build their personal trajectories according to their own wishes. Family ties, religion, race, place-based communities are more elements upon which one negotiates their own identity as well. In conclusion, while much literature still reproduces mainstream narratives on rural sexual minorities, different interpretations, like the one of Kazyak (2011) challenge the assumption that gay and lesbian identities in rural areas are closeted, hidden and oppressed.

It is true that information technology and the recent growth of social media interactions have had a significant role in fostering visibility and connecting people that are geographically dispersed, making things much easier in the countryside. Research on this topic was made in Canadian small towns by Muller Myrdahl (in: Brown & Browne, 2016). In America, only a few years before, doing activism and providing LGBTQ+ services in marginal conservative areas was still considered difficult (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010).

Some research from Slovenia and Croatia undermines the distinction between rural and urban spaces, showing that the former are actually less homophobic than the latter, or in the worst case, just as homophobic as urban spaces. (Kuhar & Švab, 2014; Butterfield, 2018). This is obviously a context that is different in many ways from the American rural and urban environment where most available literature is embedded in. Nevertheless it is worth being mentioned, since the present research is grounded in an original fieldwork that is also based in Europe.

“Going rural” could also be considered as a matter of choice. Bell & Valentine (1995), that I already mentioned, analysed the relation between homosexuality and rurality in fiction and film, emphasizing the role of rural utopias in the lesbian and gay imagination. Some years before Lynch (1987) focused on the lifestyle of white, suburban, middle-class homosexuals. His findings suggest that in the United States the lure of large cities and gay ghettos for some had started fading by the end of the 1980s already.

Nevertheless, as it can be seen from other literature, for many LGBTQ+ people living in marginal settings it is not a choice. A part from the general lack of connections and lack of resources to develop a gay identity, a number of scholars have focused on the alleged higher health risk affecting rural sexual minorities. (Cogger et al., 2012; Swank et al., 2012; Holtzman et al., 2016; Whitehead et al., 2016; Kauth et al., 2017).

“Does place of residence matter?” wonder Wienke & Hill (2013), analysing Rural–urban differences in relation to the well-being of gay men and lesbians. It does, if we read Herrera &

Scott (2005), who titled “We gotta get out of this place!” an article on leisure travel among gay men living in a small town. In the next paragraph the literature on LGBTQ+ mobility and migration will be briefly reviewed.

2.2 LGBTQ+ migration

Escaping perceived hostility is essential for gay men to explore their homosexuality in a positive, affirming manner. The work of Herrera & Scott (2005) points to leisure travels to larger cities as the major negotiation strategy used by gay men to escape the perceived oppressive environment of their small towns. Remarkably, leisure travel does not just provide a “way out”: often it is also crucial in the process of creating and reinforcing their identity. Herrera & Scott (2005) talk about “learning how to be gay”.

The power of imagery, desire, and quest of an imagined community is central in the work of Weston (1995), who is among the first ones to write about the “great gay migration” that took place in the United States in the '70s and early '80s. In order to explain this massive movement of individuals, Weston stresses the idea of “membership” to an imagined community, or attachment to a necessarily fictional group. Crucial was the origin of the birth of the movement for LGBTQ+ rights, which entailed the emergence of a collective consciousness, the designation of lesbians and gay men as “us”, “a people”. That was the point where “the only one in the world” scenario is replaced by a new gay imagery, increasingly nourished by printed materials, movie theatres, television, and other media. As Weston (1995) says, in story after story, the resulting sexual geography created a symbolic urban/rural relation which locates gay subjects in the city while the countryside became the place of gay absence. As a result, the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed an influx of tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men (as well as individuals bent upon “exploring” their sexuality) into major urban areas across the United States. The fundamental question whether a similar phenomenon took place in Europe, and particularly in Italy, will be discussed in the next chapters.

To continue the review on LGBTQ+ migration, it is sufficient to highlight how this migration has been generally conceptualised as a move from surveillance into freedom and overall from isolation into community. The movement of LG people, associated with their narratives of

'coming out', is described as a rural-to-urban model, following a linear and unidirectional pattern.

Relocation can be disruptive. Fortier (2001) examines the need for security in the context of migration, showing the enduring queer affiliation to the concept of 'home'. Migration can be conceived as "home-coming". Quite paradoxically, "home" is not the place that one leaves, but rather the place where one is heading to. The idea of "home-as-familiarity" is challenged, but not erased: the LGBTQ+ community becomes family. The documentary "Paris Is Burning", on the ballroom scene in '80s NY, has shown how these two fundamentally different social structures can merge into one, and academic literature on the topic exists too (See Arnold and Bailey: 2009). The words of RuPaul, a well-known American television personality: "We, as gay people, get to choose our family" and the recent success of the TV show "Pose" confirm that this conceptualisation of the urban gay community has become mainstream.

Although the rural-to-urban linear model has been the dominant narrative for a long time and constitutes the most common understanding of LGBTQ+ movements through space, the encompassing validity of such model has been questioned by different authors. Gorman-Murray (2007) discusses the discourse on intra-national queer migration in terms of a variety of paths and scales, due to the personal, embodied and individualistic nature of this experience. Again Gorman-Murray (2009) goes deeper into the realm of emotions, desires, intimate attachment, love, and comfort, showing how all these personal factors influence and shape queer mobilities. Wimar (2016, a), investigating LG lives in a non-western context (Izmir, Turkey), brings up the enduring significance of family ties and their impact on LG mobility decisions and argues that gay and lesbian migration must be re-conceptualised beyond the view of the family as an entity to escape from.

Like Gorman-Murray, also Lewis (2012) challenges the linearity and finality of coming-out migration. Similar to the case of Herrera & Scott (2005), he centres his analysis on particular segments of the journey, namely short trips to explore the potential of places and their gay life, comebacks and re-entry into the closet, incongruous experiences, test different places and try different identities... A similar investigation was made by Annes & Redlin (2012), whose work focuses on the complex meaning and role of the city in American and French rural gay men's imaginary and life experience. The authors show that gay men who grew up in the country often have a trajectory characterised by back and forth movements between the city and the countryside. They further argue that such movements enable rural gay men to build their sense of self and construct a peculiar rural gay identity. Urban environment and the gay

communities that are situated within have a complex role for those coming from the country, though. The city is mainly conceived as a safe space where alternative sexualities can be experienced and explored. At the same time for many rural gay men the city remains unattractive, a transitory space, a “must-go-through” where they do not wish to spend their entire lives. In their view, the perceived “effeminizing power” of the city questions and challenges their attraction for this space. The experience of the city is described both as liberating and disciplinary. It allows the exploration of their same-sex desires and attractions, but at the same time it represents a gay identity that rural gay men do not perceive to be their own.

In more recent years, Lewis (2014) has extended the importance of migration throughout the entire life course of gay men, beyond the initial development of gay identity and the crucial step of coming out. Queer migration is reframed as a tool used to negotiate different circumstances of life. Together with Mills, he links previous findings to other factors, such as affective needs and their role in determining people's trajectories. (Lewis & Mills, 2016). Again Wimark (2016, b) makes an analysis of migration and relocation of gay men in the post-rights era, in a context that fostered sexual equality early (Sweden). His findings show that migration pattern of gay people are becoming more similar to those of the general population.

2.3 Notes on the available Italian literature

LGBTQ+ topics are still quite neglected in Italy. As it was mentioned earlier in the introduction, studies framing LGBTQ+ people and communities as a topic for human geography are extremely rare in the Italian context. The academic literature both in English and Italian mainly focuses on Discrimination, homophobia, harassment and violence, internalised stigma. Other contributions discuss the issues of parenting, health risk and epidemics. Non strictly academic literature has a broader range of objects. The question of rights is the most discussed by far. Then again, parenting, homophobia and discrimination. Other topics that appear often are ethics and morality, the relation between homosexuality and the catholic faith (and church), gender roles, gender identity, homosexuality and the fascist regime, psychoanalysis and mental health.

The literature concerning the history of movements and LGBTQ+ activism in Italy and their relationship with political movements is undoubtedly valuable material to understand the history of the local context where the fieldwork was operated. However, since spatial relations are not properly addressed in any of these sources, it is hard to discern specific contents that are relevant for the present research, and it was therefore decided not to discuss this body of literature in the review above, which mostly focuses on sexual geography.

3. Case study and methodology

As shown in the previous chapter, literature, mostly of American provenance, provides insights and theories that are useful to understand the sense that gay men make of space: the distinctive sexual geography that is produced by their imagery which, together with their daily experience, shapes their perception of urbanity and rurality. Even though the theories that were illustrated are often in contrast with one another, there are some more influential understandings, especially on the gay men's mobility patterns, which are the most clear-cut element explaining their relation with the surrounding environment. It is important to stress that most theories are built upon North-American evidence, and therefore each of them might be relevant to a different degree if we examine a different case study situated in another context.

For instance, it was asked whether it is possible to talk about a gay migration or any relevant mobility patterns of the LGBTQ+ individuals in the Italian case. Is it true that in Italy too larger cities were historically an attractive place for sexual minorities? To which extent? These are questions that require some investigation. It was hypothesised that Italian LGBTQ+ people (or at least gay men) could perhaps relate to what is described by Annes and Redlin (2012) with their back and forth movements. Transitory presence in the city, first same-sex experiences and sexuality exploration. The gain of connections and a peculiar sense of self and identity would be then followed by the return to the countryside (or the small town).

The fieldwork of Annes and Redlin was based in the United States and in France, but in their conclusion the two authors call for more research to be done on the topic, using different case studies and different context. As it was said in the introduction already, no evidence comparable to the current one exist in the Italian context linking the gay population and human geography. Therefore, a new case study investigating the applicability of past and current theories in Italy would, if nothing else, fill a gap in the knowledge of the topic, providing insights from an area where the phenomenon has been largely unexplored so far.

Moreover, it is remarkable to notice one crucial characteristic of the informants producing the evidence that mentioned researchers have based their assumptions upon. They mostly grew up gay with no access to the internet and to the associated mass media culture, which is an

element that is expected to severely change the way gay men interact with one another and thus their perception of the surrounding environment. The case study described in the next paragraphs is based in part on evidence derived from the experience of very young participants and was thus likely include narratives unforeseen before.

Attention was first drawn first on paths and life experiences of gay men originated in small towns and villages in the Italian region of Lombardy, in relation to their decisions concerning relocation, or non-relocation, to an urban elsewhere. This kind of preliminary information allowed a deeper investigation on their motives, imagery, the sense they make of the space they had lived and live in and transit through, their networks.

The literature examined beforehand provides certain themes to guide the research on field. A few of these themes, formulated as questions, are listed in the following. For the sake of clarity, they are schematically articulated in bullet points, and each of them is followed by one key-name that refers to the literature previously reviewed.

- Gay identities in rural areas: is the dispersed gay population of Lombardy closeted, hidden and oppressed by social norms... or not?
(cf. Kazyak 2011).
- What are the structural difficulties experienced by gay men of the dispersed homosexual community of Lombardy?
(cf. Oswald 2003; Yarbrough 2004).
- Is it possible to identify gay individuals for which 'going rural' is a matter of choice?
(cf. Bell & Valentine 1995).
- Mobility: is it just a “way-out”, or does it constitute a crucial element in the process of creating and reinforcing one's identity?
(cf. Herrera & Scott 2005).
- How do we assess the power of imagery, desire and the quest for an imagined community, in the case of gay men of the Lombard province?
(cf. Weston 1995).
- How do gay men of the Lombard province make sense of their relocation to a large metropolitan area? Is their migration contextualised as 'leaving-home' or 'home-coming'?
(cf. Fortier 2001).

- What are the factors that influence and shape the mobility of gay men in Lombardy? (cf. Gorman-Murray 2009).
- What kind of mobility pattern characterises the life experience of gay men from the Lombard provinces? (cf. Annes & Redlin 2012).
- Does the case of Lombardy suggest the necessity of a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between gay men and their family of origin? (cf. Wimark 2016)
- What makes the city attractive to gay men from the Lombard province? What does it make it unattractive? (cf. Weston 1995; Annes & Redlin 2012).

3.1 Justification for the choice of the case study

Milan and Rome could be considered as the LGBTQ+ capitals of Italy, by virtue of the conditions identified by Corbisiero & Monaco (2017), who ranked Italian cities differently according to their inclusivity rate, which mainly evaluates policy, services provided, safety, active associations, culture and leisure. Milan in particular represents the only one case in Italy where there is a debate concerning the existence of an alleged gay neighbourhood (Soggiu, 2015). Although such urban space could hardly be compared with more famous examples, such as Castro (San Francisco), there is a generalised understanding that sees Milan as a gay-friendly hub and people anywhere in the country would commonly believe that the city is home to numerous homosexuals by virtue of its attractiveness for LGBTQ+ people. It is legitimate to wonder whether such understanding dates back to past decades or reflects a more recent shift in the common perception.

What is peculiar of the Milan functional area, and Lombardy in general, is its densely urbanised landscape. Milan, which is by far the largest centre in the region, is surrounded by a myriad of small towns and villages and most importantly a network of mid-sized towns. The latter are generally considered as small towns by the common understanding, but they often have a critical mass, counting their population and the inhabitants of the smaller centres that gravitate around them in the province, that allow them to equip themselves with some services and leisure spaces specifically targeting LGBTQ+ people, as it is noticed by

Corbisiero & Monaco (2017). Such mass could also be critical to the creation of groups and associations, as we see happening now.

The densely urbanised landscape of its countryside, and the relative ease with which it is possible to reach Milan from most locations within the region, makes Lombardy quite different compared to most case studies examined in the previous literature review by American scholars. It undoubtedly clashes with the small towns scattered in the state of Kentucky that were chosen by Gray (2009) for her investigation, for instance. Due to the nature of the regional landscape and its agglomerations, it would be more appropriate to speak of “dispersed gay community”, rather than “rural gay men”, although the latter still definitely applies to those living in remote areas in the Lombard mountains. The fieldwork described below takes their experience into account too. The result is a set of diverse experiences that could not be found if a more predominantly rural and homogeneous region was chosen as case study. The relative proximity to a large metropolitan area also makes it possible to register a higher degree of diversity in terms of mobility patterns, and a more nuanced experience of urbanity/rurality.

Moreover, mid-sized cities in Lombardy have recently demonstrated that they pioneer the struggle for visibility of the dispersed LGBTQ+ communities, which combine the necessity of inclusivity with the attachment for the local territory, which in a relatively new element unseen before. In 2015, the local LGBTQ+ organisation in Pavia, which counts around 70 thousand inhabitants, organised the first “townspride” without support of the regional coordination. For these reasons a case study located in Lombardy was evaluated to be particularly interesting, as it was expected to produce a more complex and diverse narrative compared to the results that would be obtained in another region of the country.

3.2 The field participants

After careful considerations, It was decided that the target would be narrowed down to include cisgender gay men only, even though traditional research on LGBTQ+ topics has largely prioritised this group already. Such decision was taken first and foremost for practical reasons, largely depending on the own position of the undersigned, as a full-fledged of the local gay community. Implications will be clarified later. Moreover, it was already showed in chapter 2 that much literature that this work intends to relate to is centred specifically on gay

men, and it was believed that maintaining such coherence in the sample would be precious to avoid misconceptions.

37 interviews were conducted during the months of July and August 2019 for a total of 40 participants. Even narrowing down the focus to gay men only, it was crucial to assess criteria for the selection of the sample, in order to achieve a high degree of heterogeneity. Hereunder the 5 categories according to which the sample was built are listed.

- **AGE:** participants were selected in the attempt of including all possible ages. Most of them were in their 20s and 30s. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest was 75 years old. The average age of the study sample is 34.
- **EDUCATION AND PROFESSION:** attention was given to educational background and career paths since these elements, alongside sexual orientation certainly have a remarkable impact on the imaginary and the life decisions of gay men. Despite efforts to equally include all categories, the resources for recruiting participants, and the fact the relative priority was given to enlarging the sample, resulted in a group that was less diverse than expected. The small amount of participants with a low educational level has to be acknowledged as a limitation in the present research.
- **GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION:** participants from different areas of the region were included and 7 out of 12 provinces of Lombardy were covered. An effort was made to reach informants based in small and remote communities in the Alps.
- **LIFE EXPERIENCE:** diverse mobility patterns characterising the experience of the participants were actively sought along the selection of the sample. Various examples of relocation, as well as cases of people that were attached to their original environment and never moved away from it were equally considered.
- **DEGREE OF “OUTNESS”:** while openly gay people were easier to be recruited for participating in the fieldwork, closeted or semi-closeted gays, who are more likely to suffer the living in a marginal and possibly hostile environment, were harder to reach. Some could be included in the sample. It is impossible to evaluate what would be the correct proportion between categories, but, by virtue of intuition, we can estimate that

closeted and semi-closeted gays are under-represented in this sample. This too has to be acknowledged as a limitation of the present research.

A detailed table listing the totality of the field participants, as well as the main characteristics associated with each of them can be found in the appendix. (Table 1). On the other hand, a few words on how the participants were recruited can be said hereafter. Some participants were contacted through Facebook or Instagram among personal acquaintances. More people were reached through snowballing. Moreover, informants were reached thanks to the help of gatekeepers associated with local LGBTQ+ organisations. Lastly, one decisive tool was the popular dating app known as Grindr, which made it possible to take contact with closeted gay individuals whose voice would not have been heard otherwise.

3.3 Methods

The research is obviously a qualitative one, since nearly all evidence was produced during face-to-face conversations. In order to gather data from the informants, individual meetings with them were set up, centred on qualitative in-depth interviews. Three informants agreed to participate with their partners and in those cases each couple had the opportunity to confront one another on the research topics. All interviews were recorded, with the exception of interview n.24, because the participant in question refused to meet and therefore the interview was conducted via Grindr. All interviews were entirely transcribed and they are available in a separate document, due to the excessive amount of information they contain. In the appendix, tables from 2 to 7 contain the key-evidence produced by participants, schematically organised in bullet points and grouped by theme.

The interviews were semi-structured and flexible, giving the participants tools to create their own narrative and helping them to let emerge themes and possible questions. It was decided to follow Braun & Clarke's (2006) six step guide for the organisation and interpretation of data . In particular, a semantic approach was adopted, where the interpretation follows the description of relatively explicit themes; this allowed to keep the analysis close to the informants' experiences, understandings and imagery.

The first part of the interview was articulated around two main blocks. Initially, participants were encouraged to reflect upon the place and the area where they had originally grown up,

starting with spontaneous thoughts, sensation, memories. The local community surrounding them during the years of their upbringing was another relevant theme of the first block. Attachment to family, friends, and involvement in everyday community life were investigated with the purpose of measuring the sense of belonging of each informant in relation to the place where they grew up. Also, the affinity with the local community was an important element that could be associated with coming-out experiences and thus with disclosure of same-sex attractions and feelings connected with it in the peculiar setting of the small town/village.

The second thematic block concerned the metropolis, both as a fantasized and as an experienced place. In general, participants were initially asked to focus on their adolescence and subsequently draw a mental representation of the city. In essence, the deal was to reconstruct and explore the realm of their positive or negative expectations associated with a metropolitan “other”. Later, informants were asked about their actual experience in the city, whether it consisted of daily life, sporadic presence, leisure time, night-life, others. For the purposes of the research, Milan was always considered the main reference, although Paris, London and New York City happened to be discussed in a few cases as well.

The second part of the interview had a more various composition. Several of the works discussed in the previous literature review often make assumptions on “rural gay men” as a monolithic block, failing to consider the nuances of gayness. In the present research, the way that participants make sense of their own homosexuality was also investigated as a crucial element, since it was believed that it alone has a considerable impact on relocation choices, besides being a valuable key of analysis for the information disclosed in the first part of the interview. Therefore, the gay community, personal involvement and sense of belonging were discussed too.

During the second part of the interview, participants were also explicitly asked to give their purely personal opinion on certain matters. While discussing the gay community and its characters, participants were introduced to the general idea of an alleged urban/rural dichotomy and were encouraged to reflect on how gay people might embody such dichotomy with different imageries or lifestyles. Combining all the information collected does not reflect the reality of the phenomenon, of course, but the perception of it, which contributes as well to shape the collective imaginary of gay men in relation to places. Moreover, knowing the perception of individuals on this matter represents an additional element to assess their sense of self in relation to others.

Another topic that participants were asked to give their personal opinion about was the perception of changes in the life experience of gay men living in rural or marginal areas across time. In relation to this, participants were asked to react to a couple of short music-videoclips that were shown to them. The first one, “Smalltown Boy” (Bronski Beat, 1984), reflects the narrative that has been most popular for decades, that gay individuals do not belong to small towns. It contains elements of homophobic violence, fear, shame, and loneliness. In the second clip, “Home” (Morgxn, 2017), which is much more recent, elements of discomfort are still present, but the life in the quiet suburb is more associated with feelings of boredom. The urban LGBTQ+ community is depicted in a fierce and joyful way, and reflects the modern and typically American narrative of the *It Gets Better Project*, urging rural gay men to come out and assimilate into gay communities and culture.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked a few more personal questions to complement their individual profiles: cultural references (cinema, literature, art, music, fashion), icons (gay- and non-gay-related), as well as their visions for the future.

3.4 Conclusive remarks

Regarding the access of the setting, I was confident that, being a cisgender gay man who grew up in the area, my own condition will facilitate the process of trust building. On the one hand, having possibly shared the same experiences could put my interviewees more at ease and encourage them to give honest answers. On the other hand, however, literature shows that interviewing peers has some drawbacks. In order to prevent mistakes, I followed Platt (1981). To conclude this chapter on methods, a few remarks on ethical concerns are imperative. The fieldwork was conducted with the understanding that participants might have potentially reacted emotionally to part of the interviews, since for some the questions and the topic itself were possibly sensitive. They were informed beforehand about the research topic anyway, having the possibility of withdraw if they felt uneasy about it. They were also given the possibility to withdraw at any point or to ask me to omit part of their answers. For concerns specifically related to LGBTQ+ minorities, I followed Meezan & Martin (2012) and Suen (2015).

4. Analysis and results

The evidence concerning each participant was categorised in different blocks according to the theme, so that individual cases could be compared on selected topics isolated from one another. For this reason, the first section of this chapter is dedicated to the place of origin of gay men coming from small town and villages in Lombardy, which includes the relationship with the related local community. The section that follows is dedicated to the participants' mental representation of the big city. Lastly, a third section is dedicated to the ways that participants engage with large metropolitan areas, with a focus on the capital city of the region. It was decided to present the basic evidence of the fieldwork isolating these three macro themes and to overlap the results together only gradually. In this way the reader will have the opportunity to follow more closely the process of the analysis that was made. However, in the next three sections results are presented concisely. More detailed explanations will be added and the most interesting findings will be further discussed in the following chapters.

4.1 Gay men in relation to the place of their origin

First of all, each individual case in the sample was considered in order to evaluate whether they associate to their place of origin mainly positive or mainly negative feelings. This simple evaluation produced two distinctive groups that are equal in size, with 18 individuals generally expressing positive feels towards their village, their small town or their neighbourhood, and 17 individuals expressing negative ones. A few participants make exception to this binary rule due to the fact that their opinions were contrasted or not enough clear-cut. Their feedbacks, positive and negative ones, were incorporated into the comprehensive analysis anyway.

The fact that the two opposed groups contain overall the same amount of individuals does not represent at all a relevant finding, since the sample was built with the precise purpose of including diverse experiences and perspectives based on expectations, and therefore such equal distribution was at least predictable. The numbers are not meant to mirror reality and, given that the present research has a qualitative nature, what is relevant is the realm of

motives behind attachment or repulsion, and how these feelings relate to other variables characterising the profile of the participants. Aspects that were taken into account are age, educational level, degree of “outness”: whether gay men are out, not out to anyone, or closeted to at least one family member, in case they lived with their parents. One more variable was the degree of remoteness of their place of origin. Of all localities considered in the research, 15 were classified as (relatively) remote, due to their low degree of connectedness with urban areas. Most of these remote settings are located in mountainous areas in the provinces of Sondrio, Bergamo and Brescia.

Participants that expressed overall positive feelings towards their place of origin often insisted on the quality of place. They evoked sensations of calm and peace. Some praised the availability of space, fresh air. Several informants did not hesitate to call it “home”, recalling positive memories of childhood, stressing that their village is always a safe place to come back to, and expressed attachment to their family too. The desire for stability emerged from some interviews, an authentic attachment to traditions from others. Some people described their attachment to the place as territorial belonging, strongly identifying with the respective local community. The latter were the participants that most overlapped the themes of place and people. Part of them only expressed appreciation for the social characteristics of small villages and communities, stressing the positive aspects of a closely knitted network of friends, relatives and neighbours. A few even described their personal engagement in the local political scene.

In general, it is remarkable to notice that the gay experience was nearly always overlooked in the positive considerations that participants made regarding the place of their origin. The major exception is represented by a few of youngest ones, who recall a popular party labelled “Pupa e Scintilla” which was organised once a month in the immediate surroundings of Bergamo, a mid-sized town in the centre of the region, from 2012 until recent times. Youngsters, age from 19 to 25, remember participating to the parties as a significant experience and they are the only ones that related in part the theme of homosexuality with the positive relationship they have with their place of origin.

On the contrary, one's own sexuality is a very recurring theme in the discourses of those participants forming part of the second group, which gathers together people united by the negative feelings they expressed towards the place of the village or the small town they originated from. Sadness and isolation are emotions that are associated with the sense of otherness and non-belonging that some participants feel towards the familiar places where they grew up. The unsophisticated character of rural life, boredom, and FOMO (Fear Of

Missing Out) are elements that were often touched on by individuals that had chosen to leave the province behind and to permanently settle in Milan. Similar considerations were made by others who have not moved yet or made different choices, nevertheless highlighting the nothingness of the place and calling it “lame” or “grotesque”. Compared to the first group, participants in the second group more often tended to overlap the themes of place and population, emphasizing the role that the local community had in making the place uncomfortable for them. The village is negatively described as conservative because the people that live in it are perceived as such. Moreover, some of the young informants spontaneously associated their village or small town with old people, to explain its lack of attractiveness for them.

As a matter of fact, if the focus of the interview properly shifted from the place as a spatial unit to the people living in it, including the participants' families, the original balance between the two groups results broken after analysis. Whereas initially the appreciation ratio was 18 to 17, when the people are centred participants expressing positive feelings are only 13, countering the 22 expressing overall discomfort towards the community of their place of origin.

The disparity in the appreciation ratio depends on the fact that some participants insisted on the positive quality of place of their area, despite having poor or no relationship with the community inhabiting the same area. Indifference towards the neighbours is the least negative among the numerous emotions and experiences that emerged from this part of the analysis. Feelings of non-belonging, alienation, and generalised mistrust emerged from several interviews, and were more or less explicitly linked to the otherness experienced by participants due to their sexual orientation. People in villages and small towns were frequently associated with racism, sexism, homophobia, bigotry and narrow-mindedness. Bullying problems were also mentioned, albeit very rare. Nevertheless, “episodes” as they were called by participants referring to episodes of casual mockery and unpleasant encounters, were more frequent.

Informant n.4, now permanently living in Milan, claimed he was betrayed but all the people in his original environment. Although he was exceptional in this regard, his feeling of resentment towards the local community he grew up within was shared by other participants that had moved to Milan as well, like informants n.5 and n.26. Interestingly enough, such feeling was also directed towards other gay people living in their respective original

environments. Some claimed that they perceived as suffocating the idea of being forced to mingle with the few ones available just because they did not have more options.

Adversed feelings towards some gay people residing in villages were also expressed by young participants still residing in their village, but this has a more generational character since mistrust is directed to older (and often closeted) gay guys that are seen as part of a hostile environment. The proverbial obsession of people over “what people think” and the substantial erasure of the homosexual experience from the picture of what can be conceived and even discussed about, that are both features that often pop up in the academic literature, were also mentioned in interviews. (Informants n.33 and n.37).

Lastly, an element that was predictably among the most referred to was the tension with the family of origin. On the other hand, the attachment to one's own family characterises the experience of most of the participants that expressed overall positive feelings towards their community as a whole. To be fair, attachment to the family is a positive feature that appeared even in cases where the discomfort with the population in general ultimately prevails.

Attachment to the local community as such, even with personal bond do not necessarily exist, was registered in the cases of those claiming that they belonged to their territory. These people do not only have strong ties with relatives and friends in their surroundings, but also enjoy day-to-day interaction with strangers with which they feel connected in virtue of a shared local identity. It is interesting to notice that one informant, roughly sharing this point of view, applied it specifically to the local LGBTQ+ community of Bergamo and its surroundings, which he called “frocietà”¹ and talked about in positive terms. Although two more young informants included in their discourse around the local community positive memories of experiences with their first LGBTQ+ crew in mid-sized towns (Bergamo and Brescia) during high-school years, the question of homosexuality was still largely neglected by those expressing overall positive feelings towards their community of origin.

At this point, it is possible to make a few considerations taking into account the variables that were listed above, first of all examining the two hypothetical groups distinguished on the basis of the appreciations that participants expressed towards their place of origin.

The two groups are roughly equal in size, but the average age of participants expressing overall negative feelings (30,7) is significantly lower compared to that of their counterparts

1 The word originally used by informant 3 was “frocietà”. “Frocio” is the Italian derogatory term to refer to a homosexual person, comparable to the English word “faggot”, which is re-appropriated by the community as an act of pride. The wordplay with “society” highlights the collective and social dimension of the new term. Frocietà can be one or several, each associated with a specific territorial unit, as observed in the discourse of informant 3, who added a local dimension to the term as well.

(37,2). However, this data is one to be careful with, since the sample is necessarily biased due to its small dimension, and the sole presence of the oldest couple of informants in the second group contributes to increase the average age of the group as a whole to a considerable extent. Prudent remarks notwithstanding, we believe that the age gap in this regard could be expected and this will be further discussed later.

Another limitation of the sample that was already highlighted is the high average educational level of the participants. Nevertheless, it was observed that participants beyond the age of the studies (>25) that have never received a higher education tend to show appreciation and attachment to the place of their origin.

One variable that does not appear to be decisive alone is the degree of remoteness. Participants coming from areas classified as remote equally expressed both affection and disaffection towards their village and its surroundings. The picture changes when the variable “outness” is taken into account as well. Closeted gays living in remote areas showed appreciation for their place of residence, generally focusing on the quality of place and less on the local population, with which they do not engage much, as shown above. In general it was observed that participants that are not out maintain a positive view of their place of origin, where they claim they are happy to live.

“Outness” alone was not considered a sufficient to categorise participants based on the sense they make of their homosexuality, thus one additional evaluation was operated. One of the macro themes used to categorise the evidence produced during the fieldwork was “gay community – sense of belonging”. Along with the analysis of this block, participants were evaluated from 1 to 4 on what could be called a rudimentary gay-pride-scale. Criteria of assessment were: the degree of “outness”, ways and words they used to identify themselves, whether they have other gay people as friends, attendance/desire to attend gay events, sense of belonging to a gay community, relevance given to gay culture, knowledge/contact/engagement with LGBTQ+ organisations, degree of discomfort with other gays/other fringes of the LGBTQ+ community. Participants were not asked to fill in clear-cut surveys, since the fieldwork had a qualitative nature. Hence, the evaluation of each participant based on the criteria listed above is undoubtedly susceptible to minor mistakes. However, it was a decisive tool to spot a relevant trend. People that were evaluated higher on the scale (3,4) are disproportionately represented in the group of participants united by shared negative feelings towards the place where they are from. On the other hand, the mirror group sees a disproportionate representation of people with poor ranking (1,2). The relevance that is given to “being gay” in the life of each individual is a complex variable that might depend on the

entanglement of many other factors, but it constitutes in itself the primary cause to determine the degree of attachment/appreciation of gay men towards the place of their origin, as results seem to suggest.

To conclude, one more consideration needs to be done on the the disparity in the appreciation ratio when the focus of the interview shifted from the more abstract concept of the place to the people that live in it. Earlier in this paragraph, it was asserted that such disparity depends on the fact that some participants insisted on the positive quality of place of their area, despite having poor or no relationship with the community inhabiting the same area. Moreover, some showed attachment to the memory of a happy childhood, daily habits and in general to a sense of stability. This was true particularly in the cases of young participants, as it was observed that older ones tend more often to coincide place and people in their individual experience and are thus more coherent. Furthermore, it was observed that the inconsistency characterises the discourses of informants that are not out or score poorly in the gay-pride-scale that was introduced just above. These are people that appreciate the place where they grew up and still live in, but chose not to maintain relationship with the local community and instead stay in their corner and hunker down.

4.2 The metropolis as an imagined place

The way that gay men coming from villages and small towns engage with large metropolitan areas was the second major topic of conversation with the field participants. Since one of the purposes of the research was also exploring the way that Milan, as a city that is possibly comparable to well-known for being gay-friendly hubs, is perceived and used by gay men in the area, the capital city of Lombardy was subject of particular concern. Before discussing the actual lived experience that they have made of the big city, attention was given to their mental representation of such space, particularly considering the picture that intuitively defines their vision of a metropolis before actually experiencing it independently, typically during the years of adolescence, or later, in the cases where participants became conscious of their homosexuality at a later stage. The evidence gathered in this regard has the form of expectations, fantasies, prejudices of any sort, images and concepts that were spontaneously associated to large metropolitan areas and especially to Milan. Evidence concerning the metropolis and imagination did not necessarily emerge from all interviews, and it was decided

not to force anyone to come up with answers. However, it is significant to notice that people that did not produce evidence in this regard are among the oldest participants in the fieldwork, highlighting how the attractiveness of Milan for gay people is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Of course, not all participants reported sentiments of attraction towards the city. In the case of this macro theme too, a summary analysis was made to first evaluate where the representation that participants have of the metropolis is associated to positive images or negative ones. In general, a majority of the informants (17) depicted a positive representation of Milan, including informants that had demonstrated to be a good relationship with their place of origin, but nevertheless recall metropolitan fantasies made of great expectations and desires that they had felt before. On the other hand, a minority (9) showed a negative representation of the city, if not actual repulsion towards such environment. There were also some cases that depicted a confused representation with mixed feelings.

It is interesting to notice how the aspect of sexuality influences the mental representation, particularly because the disparity in terms of weight that sexuality plays between the group that depicted a positive and the group that depicted a negative representation. Whereas (homo)sexuality was a crucial factor determining the attractiveness of the big city for people, with 11 informants exposing it as a primary reason for their fascination, only 3 informants had concerns related to their sexuality causing repulsion for the big city. Their motives are interesting and one in particular will be the subject of a significant part of the discussion in chapter 6. Two informants instinctively associated immediately the idea of the big city with the higher number of gay people that can be found there, and this was precisely the reason why they were repulsed by such environment. One had moral concerns about nightlife and called Milan a place of perdition, whereas the other had Milan and the gay community linked in his imaginary to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Lastly, the third informant produced a confused representation of an imagined gay-friendly city that he would be curious about, but ultimately scared about because of the competitive vibe that he senses in the gay scene in Milan, fearing that he would simply not fit.

However, most informants having an overall negative representation of the metropolis produced a narrative that is containing elements that have nothing to do with sexuality. Milan was described as an alienating place, and its chaotic character and the frenetic rhythm of daily life were the elements that most people mentioned. Lack of space, excessive dimension, traffic and noise were brought up by informants that had previously shown to be particularly attached to the quiet village they grew up in. Another element that is related to this kind of

imagery is the sense of danger and the distress that is associated with it, that emerged from a few interviews as well. Gay men in this group also include a social dimension to explain their aversion to the city. Most asserted that they had always been scared of being lonely in the city, since in their imagery this place is populated by an anonymous crowd of individuals minding their own business, where it is easy to lose social contact. As a matter of fact, the narrative of “nervous city users” has been part of the reputation of Milan for decades and it is widespread all over the country, which would explain the natural repulsion of many men born and raised in small peripheral communities, regardless of the sexual orientation, as the evidence provided by the group considered above seem to suggest.

Not surprisingly, some of these allegedly negative elements can be found again among the motives of those that were attracted to the metropolis, in a positive light this time. The chaos, the rhythm, the vibrancy of the nightlife are some of the most cited images characterising positive representations of the city as well. Some of the people that had spent at least a period living in the capital city of Lombardy started to describe their expectations by saying that they always desired a “big city life”, like the one seen in movies.

Although other elements that emerged, like the fascination for the crowd and for diversity are in many ways relevant, the dimension of sexuality is by far the key-feature to understand the the attractive power exerted by the metropolis towards gay men coming from villages and small towns, as it was already mentioned above. In this regard, Milan was described as a “paradise”, a “promised land”, a “dream-land”, a “city full of promises”, a “place of endless possibilities”. The representation emerging from the analysis of the evidence provided by this group is that of a city that is a place of liberation, both from the nothingness of the countryside and the suburbs, and for the obstacles imposing limits to sexual freedom of participants. Some people described it as a place where they could freely express their identities, others used the category of “safe-space”, although they were not as many as it could be reasonably expected, given the notorious and recurring conceptualisation of the city as a safe refuge for queer people.

Some were not excessive in their enthusiasm, and they purely highlighted the dense dimension of the metropolis, associating it with a much higher number of gays per square km and therefore a place that creates many more opportunities to find and engage with gay peers. For some others the imagined space of the metropolis was a way-out to aspire to, a place where they could escape from a hostile or boring environment. It is interesting how a couple of informants said that they expected to find in Milan meaningful connections, claiming that he was not interested in bonding with gay individual in their area, whom they linked to

meaningless sexual encounters arranged through dating apps. Their imagery reveals the perception of a divided gay community, where specific characteristics are associated in turn to gay individuals concentrated in the capital city, and to gay individuals that are dispersed into the wider region.

It was hypothesised that people that had expressed attachment to the original environment of their village/small town would produce a negative representation of the big city. On the other hand, it was expected that a negative relationship to one's own place of origin would correspond to a positive representation of the metropolitan environment. In general, the hypothesis was confirmed, but obviously there were exceptions. One of these exceptions was already mentioned above: the peculiar case of one young informant feeling scared and inadequate with respect to the gay community in Milan, despite being curious about it and above all uncomfortable in the environment of his own village. Another exceptional case of rejection of one's place of origin that does not lead to fascination for the big city is constituted by informant n.27, who moved away from his small town, and decided to settle in a mid-sized town instead. His case will also be discussed in detail later in chapter 7. More exceptions involve participants at ease in their small communities who nevertheless created a very positive picture of their expectations for the big city, showing how the metropolitan environment can be attractive for gay people that are comfortable in their place of origin too.

Lastly, the evidence concerning the metropolis and the imagery of the participants was considered in relation to the basic variables such as age, degree of remoteness, degree of “outness”. Most importantly, it is remarkable to notice that the average age of the informants united by a shared overall positive picture of the metropolitan environment is 27,7, that is significantly lower compared to the average age of the sample as a whole (34,3). Again, the limited size of the sample makes it impossible to claim anything definitive in this regard, since a few informants can already make a difference in a sample of 40 individuals. Nevertheless, results seem to suggest that the attractiveness of Milan for gay people is a relatively recent phenomenon, which would confirm previous hypothesis. Be that as it may, the nuances of such phenomenon will be discussed later.

Relating the evidence on imagery with the degree of remoteness of the place of origin did not produce results, since it was not possible to identify any relevant trend. Things were different if the variable taken into consideration was the degree of “outness”. Nearly half of the people in the group defined by a shared negative representation of the metropolis is closeted or semi-

closeted. In general it was observed that, whereas participants in the opposite group scored high in the gay-pride-scale, participants that are hostile to the big city generally score lower, mirroring the analogous comparison when the theme was the relationship was the place of origin.

4.3 The metropolis as an experienced place

Due to diverse life experiences and mobility paths, the whole of the sample was allocated in different groups, each composed by individuals with similar stories. The size of each group purely reflect choices made during the fieldwork in order to ensure some sort of balance, time and practical issues permitting. However, due to the research focus, relative priority was given to still residing in small town and villages, which, as a result are more represented in the sample. Informants were distributed as follows: 13 never moved away from their area of origin; 4 had lived in large metropolitan areas, but eventually moved back to their place of origin; 6 had moved from a small village to a mid-sized town in the region; 8 had moved to a large metropolitan area (7 in Milan); 8 grew up in a mid-sized town in the region and decided to stay.

Participants living in Milan obviously experience the city to a different level compared to those living in the provinces, but everyone underwent the same process of analysis. Participants were first inquired to evaluate whether they could be considered city users for reasons that are linked to their (homo)sexuality or not. The individual profile of each participant would be further enriched with different labels depending on the kind of activity performed in Milan: nightlife, culture, or activism. “Nightlife” included attendance in clubs, bars, other types of LGBTQ+ spaces, parties. “Culture” was meant to allude to a more profound dimension of identity and leisure, and it was a label associated to participation in cultural events with a focus on queerness, or attendance of LGBTQ+ book-stores. The presence in the city due to participation in groups performing LGBTQ+ activism was another possibility that was taken into account. The experience of participants was also categorised in terms of time, with the purpose of distinguishing whether the presence in Milan had a more or less regular character, or it traced back to past experiences mainly. Moreover, the evidence in this block was examined with the purpose of establishing whether the presence of the participants in the city was associated by each of them to feelings of personal safety or not.

Depending on all these aspects, participants were re-allocated into different subgroups that were in turn scrutinised in relation to the basic variables that were used for the analysis of the evidence treated in the previous two sections. The main results are listed here below.

Considering the whole of the sample, only 11 participants were classified as people that rarely go to Milan and never for reasons linked somehow to their sexuality. Excluding some that were too young, not fully independent yet, despite being curious about the city, simply never had yet the opportunity to experience it, the rest of the sub-group was composed by people that had a negative representation of the city, according to the analysis summarised in the previous section. Bad mental representation and absence in the city do not necessarily coincide though. Evidence shows how gay spaces in the city were, or had been, frequented also by individuals that had expressed hostility to the idea of the city and in some case also to the gay community as such.

Concerning the non-attendance in the city of the 11 participants, it was observed that the remoteness of the place of origin of participants cannot be said to have a definitive impact in all cases. It surely played a role for some, but since other informants coming from villages in very remote areas showed a different narrative, we must conclude that presence in the city was for the most participants a matter of choice. Therefore it can be linked to the score in the gay-pride-scale, which is in fact the lowest for this sub-group, people under 20 years old excluded for the reasons above specified.

27 participants mentioned the nightlife and attendance to LGBTQ+ spaces associated with leisure as an activity that they engage or have engaged with in the metropolis, making it the largest subgroup of the whole analysis. For several, nightlife was the only relevant activity that they claimed to perform in Milan, and the fact that the number exceeds the number of those that expressed a positive mental image of the city (17) shows that participating in various ways to the LGBTQ+ nightlife of the metropolis is something that most gay men from the peripheral provinces of the region do, regardless of their overall hostility to the idea of being in the city. Attendance is high even among those that are not located in Milan, but can often go there for a night-out, which is possible due to the relative proximity that most areas in the region enjoy with respect to the capital city. While sharing their personal stories, some participants related their experience to that of several other gay men living in small towns and villages scattered around the region who find an outlet in brief excursion in the gay metropolitan night.

It was observed that, whereas the leisure time in the city characterising the experience of most participants can be largely associated to activities such as drinking (bars) and dancing (clubs),

only older informants (over 50 years old) shared experiences that have a more explicit sexual dimension, referring to places like darkrooms, peculiar kind of clubs, saunas, and even cinemas, in the case of the oldest couple of informants, whose sporadic presence in the city dates back to the 70s. A case of predominance of the sexual dimension was exceptionally found in the experience of a young informant too, although this was of a different nature, being the sexual encounters privatised as they were arranged through dating apps. Since this exception is an interesting one, being associated with a high sense of discomfort towards the gay community in Milan specifically, it will be discussed in chapter 6 relation to the imagery other young informants.

A third of the 27 participants that mentioned “nightlife” traced their presence in the city back to past experiences, claiming that at present time they rarely go to Milan for fun or they stopped completely. Quite predictably, older gays that had regular experiences in the city when they were younger can be found in this sub-group. However, most “quitters” are actually rather young. Their cases are interesting because, with the exception of a 24 years old informant who had been regular in the Milanese gay scene since he was a teenager and was gradually disappointed by what he called the “promiscuity of gay people”, the others score very high in the gay-pride-scale. In essence, while they consider their (homo)sexuality a crucial aspect of their persona, they believe that the LGBTQ+ dimension of Milan is unfulfilling. They had precise critiques, mostly involving the aspects of commodification of sexualities, the community dimension and the concept of safe space, that will be discussed in detail in chapter 7.

Whereas nightlife and disengaged leisure are dominant in the metropolitan experience of gay men in Lombardy, a more profound dimension of identity and leisure is barely present in the picture. Activities that can be ascribed to the label “culture” or “activism” emerged from 4 interviews only, although two more participants shared their past of engagement, which stopped when they decided to cultivate their sexual identity in a different setting.

A remarkable result that can be associated with this one is the surprisingly low number of participants that associated the metropolis to the idea of safe space. Only 3 participants asserted that they feel safer in the city than elsewhere. One of them, currently living in Milan drew a symbolic boundary along the ring road delimiting the central districts of Milan, which would separate in his view the area where one is safe, the centre, and the periphery, where homophobic incidents might occur. It is remarkable how he was the only participant in the sample producing such a discourse.

In general, even when they were explicitly asked if they felt more protected or more free to openly express their sexual identity when they are in Milan, most participants residing in small towns gave a negative response, claiming that the setting would not change how they feel and how they act. A different response came from the participants who live in the city, who confessed that their behaviour changes when they go back to their place of origin to visit their families, describing experiences could be said of constraint. Everyone in that sub-group cared to clarify that the metropolitan lifestyle has not changed them much, while they assert that several gay men coming from small towns or the countryside go through an impressive transformation when they move permanently to Milan. Although several informants talked about this allegedly common phenomenon, no individual with an experience corresponding to the character they pictured could be found and interviewed for this research. The fact remains that nearly anybody insisted on the safety dimension, while the analysis of the evidence on this macro theme brings out the image of a city that is very much regarded as the prime site for experiencing concentration and contacts with other gay people through participation in nightlife and leisure activities preferably with no substantial engagement.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, general findings will be reworked in relation to some of the main themes that emerged from the literature review and were subsequently highlighted in chapter 3. The goal of this section is also to provide concise answers where the case study of the present research confronts the findings of research previously done on the topic of rural sexual minorities.

The research that resulted in the works of scholars like Oswald (2003) and Yarbrough (2004), that is crucial to understand the structural difficulties faced by gay people in rural locales, was conducted in a early phase of the internet era, when dating apps were not even a thing yet. Nevertheless, the same key-features defining the hardship of gay men in rural America in the 2000s can be found in the in the experience of the disperse community of gay men scattered in the villages and small town of Lombardy. Understandably, geographical dispersion and lack of access to LGBTQ+ services and resources hit rural America on a different level that they do in the case of Lombardy. The relative proximity of Milan, which works as a catalyst for gay men seeking leisure opportunities but also the existence of LGBTQ+ associations or spaces in the main urban centres of peripheral provinces in the region, make obstacles like geographical dispersion and lack of access much easier to overcome in the Italian context.

The aspect of the access to LGBTQ+ resources and services and the relative restrictions that are posed by living in marginal environment, were an important part of the discourse for those informants that currently live in Milan or make a regular use of the city by virtue of their involvement in activist groups that are located there. Geographical dispersion emerged as a significant concern for those informants whose village is located in a particularly remote area in the mountains. Notwithstanding their complaint about having to travel the distance to be able to find partners or friends, or having to cope with loneliness in their village, geographical dispersion cannot be defined as a major obstacle for most cases, contrary to what has been shown by American scholars.

On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that any difference exist between Italy and America when it comes to living in a homophobic social climate, which is another relevant aspect often discussed in American literature. A sensible majority of the informants mentioned this aspect as an important part of their sense of discomfort. The interview with informant n.12 took place in the living-room of the house where he lives alone, in a village

situated in a valley in the province of Bergamo. When a neighbour knocked on the door, informant n.12 removed the huge rainbow-flag displayed on the wall before opening. Adding to that, informant n.15, who is a councillor in the municipality of Bergamo provided some interesting information that he could have access to due to his job. Since 2016 same-sex civil partnership have been celebrated in Italy and informant n.15 said he could observe a trending movement of couples residing in villages scattered around the province that in the last 3-4 years have come to register their partnership at the municipality of Bergamo, despite the fact that all the municipalities, even the smallest village, are formally obliged to comply to the rules since 2016. The ongoing trend seems to suggest that the overall homophobic social climate that gay people still perceive in small town and villages does not have an impact in terms of relocation choices, but in terms of gay visibility in marginal settings, which is restrained.

In this regard, the discussion could also be referred to Kazyak (2011), whose work aim to challenge the assumption that gay identities in rural areas are closeted, hidden and oppressed. The evidence gathered in the present research suggest that Kazyak's urge to validate rural gay experiences may have produced a narrative that is lacking and inaccurate. She claims that informants are “free from cultural understandings about what it means to be gay”, actually, proclaiming that their refusal to articulate an “urban gay identity” results from their lack of interest in doing so. In fact, such “flexibility in terms of how they make sense of their sexuality” seems more a product of the wish of affirm oneself as a full-fledged member of the place-based community regardless of sexual differences. While they claim to be visible and recognised by their neighbours, “being known as a good person” is the central aspect in the discourse of Kazyak's interviewees, whose attitude reflect the need to be accepted by their straight counterparts, to which is implicitly recognised a role of dominance. “being known as a good person” implies complying to the local community's values, which might be flexible enough to allow some space to non-straight individuals, but not necessarily welcoming towards models and lifestyles that are perceived as excessively alternative. It is remarkable to notice how several of Kazyak's informants were regularly living with their long-term partner following a model that does not significantly diverge from the heterosexual family paradigm. In general, we believe that if the evidence produced by Kazyak's participants was analysed taking into account variables like pride, following the gay-pride-scale that was used by the present research, her participants would probably score quite low. This consideration does not aim to invalidate the rural gay experience as it was presented by Kazyak, but rather to highlight that the alleged “freedom” and “flexibility” in constructing gay identities in rural

locales often might be the result of a mere renunciation to explore queerness in favour or a different set of values that align more with the common sense expressed by a tightly knit place-based community.

In the frame of the present research conducted in Lombardy, informant n.10, who is still living in the same area where he grew up, despite being absolutely repulsed by such an environment, shared his reflection on what he called the “conditions of the province”, in relation to the gay population. Some of his words are translated here below:

“The thing is: homosexuality gets somehow domesticated by the province. It is not included... it is domesticated. If domesticating homosexuality means allowing homosexuals to be themselves only to the conditions of the province... I don't see such a great progress ahead. I personally don't want my truth and my otherness to be adulterated as the result of some negotiation, only because someone else has control over the negotiation and gets to decide whether it is okay for me to peacefully live here and to what conditions... No. Obviously, if you educate kids to believe that this is the norm, they will never feel in danger, as long as they mimic the norm. Some won't even put it into question. I do not wish this to our young ones. Despite being truly happy to see how many today come out of the closet early, I'm afraid that they are losing awareness of how we got here. I don't wish them to just get comfortable and comply to the conditions of the province...”

(Informant n.10)

The Lombard periphery counts among its ranks prominent cases of gay men that stuck to the “conditions of the province” and are perfectly integrated within the wider (straight) society. Informant n.16, for instance, a young councilman in Bergamo, is openly gay and was always well respected by his (generally homophobic) electorate, that recently gave him full support to successfully become member of the Italian parliament. In his interview, informant n.16 also mentioned the mayor of Barbata, a 700 people village, who has been living together with his partner for over 20 years and was elected with 95% of the vote. It is interesting to notice how both politicians are affiliated to parties that oppose gay rights and nevertheless enjoy full respect and support from their local communities, that seem to appreciate the discretion of those that treat their sexuality as their own private business, do not show off and make life choices that are similar to those of everyone else.

Informant n.26, who makes sense of his homosexuality in radically different terms, made a clear distinction between gay men living in the province and gay men living in the metropolis,

claiming that the latter only are “truly gay”. Informant n.26 believes that gay men in the province limit their experience to the sexual dimension, while waiting for “the one with whom they retire to private life following a perfect heteronormative model”. While some participants of the present research (n.13; n.30) correspond to the character portrayed by informant n.26, it is also interesting to notice that others from younger generations (n.11; n.12) created a narrative where the idea of an urban/rural divide is implicitly reinforced by the different use that “rural” gay men in Lombardy make of the two settings. The province where they live is the place for hookups, which are virtually possible everywhere today thanks to dating apps. On the contrary, the city is spontaneously associated to more identity-connected community initiatives or leisure activities of a non-merely-sexual character. The dating-app Grindr counts among its regular users several closeted gay men undercover with faceless accounts that are equally present in the peripheral provinces like in the metropolis. But whereas the environment of Milan offers infinitely more opportunities, the frustration of finding partners in areas where the gay community is more dispersed excessively augments the perception and the mental association between these areas and closeted homosexuals. This results in a vicious circle where gay people adapt themselves to the narrative and mostly give up the attempt to engage with other gay people in their area beyond causal hookups, despite the fact that more and more gays are out and eager to explore other dimensions of their sexual identity even in provincial areas.

In short, is it possible to assess whether men of the dispersed gay community in Lombardy are hidden, closeted and oppressed or not? Arguably, scholars considering other more or less “rural” contexts that are debating such question often cherry-pick their informants depending on the thesis they aim to demonstrate, or the specific issue they wish to illustrate. Kazyak (2011) for instance, focused on Gays and lesbians that are out, completely neglecting the experiences of those that are not that are surely numerous in the countryside of Illinois/Indiana where she conducted her research. In essence, if one considers the whole picture in its complexity, there cannot be definitive answers. Since the present thesis was conceived as an exploratory study on a subject not investigated yet in the given context, the sample was selected purposefully including people with diverse experiences, that at times match the theories of one scholar, at times match the theories of another. This is true also for the other themes that inspired the present investigation.

Wimark (2016) wondered whether it is appropriate today to re-conceptualise the relationship between gay men and their family of origin. Our results show that, despite several young participants enjoy a positive relationship with a supportive family, which are similar to the

experiences reported by Wimark (2016) and reflect what would be reasonably expected in the post-rights era, some other participants, even from younger segments, reported stories of oppressive families, showing how progresses are not to be given for granted.

In what circumstances does such discomfort influence the mobility pattern of gay men in Lombardy? Herrera and Scott (2005) discussed the meaning of travels to large metropolitan areas, distinguishing between travels that represent mere “way out” of an oppressive environment and travels that are crucial element in the process of creating and reinforcing a gay identity. Our results first show that the former category identified by Herrera and Scott defines the experience of the participants who travel to the city for the sole purpose of fulfilling those needs that cannot be met in their area, to whom they are attached with positive feelings, but the metropolitan experience does not change the sense they make of their homosexuality (n.13, n.16, n.21). However, it is interesting to notice that also very young participants can be associated to the equation metropolis-mere way-out, as a result of their embeddedness in virtual LGBTQ+ communities that provided them with all the necessary tools to “learn how to be gay”, as Herrera and Scott would put it, overcoming the need of being part of a place-based LGBTQ+ community to be socialised with gay peers. (n.9, n.11, n.31). Findings like this one suggest that the popularisation of gay culture that we are witnessing in recent years will increasingly play a role in disrupting the meaning that large metropolitan areas have in the gay culture and imagination.

On the other end, results of the present research show how travels still constitute a crucial experience in the life of several gay men. Results point to large metropolitan areas, but together with the urban dimension, another aspect that seem to be a relevant common trait for some is that of the distance, or otherness with respect to one's familiar context. Whereas informant n.17 regularly travelled to Milan multiple nights a week in order to explore a sexuality that he could not “act” in the village where he used to live with his parents, and gradually defined his identity by virtue of reiterated encounters with other gay men in the city, the same environment did not provide the necessary freedom to others, whose life-changing experiences happened further away from home. Informant n.19a, for instance, locates in Athens the starting point of his “homosexual career”. Whether the capital city of Greece was a homosexual paradise in the 70s, as he claims, cannot be confirmed, but the dimension of the holiday and the sense of disruption and freedom that is commonly associated to it, together with a new (exotic) context, detached from any familiar place or presence, presumably played a role. Similarly, informant n.12 found better opportunities to explore different facets of his sexuality and his identity in Naples, and described his experience explicitly saying that

initially in Milan he felt like the environment was not sufficiently different compared to the area where he grew up.

In all three emblematic cases mentioned in the paragraph above the protagonists had ultimately chosen the province over the metropolis, for their daily life. What guided the choice of those that decided to relocate permanently in a large metropolitan area? Wimark (2016) demonstrated that in the post-rights era the migration pattern of gay people are becoming more similar to those of the general population, which can be true in part according to the findings of the present research too. Informants n.5 and n.26 for instance, without disregarding the aspect of homosexuality, insisted nevertheless on describing the power of attraction of the city using categories that could determine straight people's trajectories too. However, results show that the high emphasis that is given by individuals on “being gay” as a distinctive trait of their personality is a common factor for those that have relocated to Milan, while it is in general less frequent among those that have made different choices. As it was already said, it is hard to assess the criteria to establish whether and how such emphasis is socially produced for each individual starting from such a small sample. It would be necessary to dedicate to it a more in-depth further investigation.

Contrary to what was described by Weston (1995) about the great wave of the gay migration in the United States, the results reported in the previous chapter show that the quest for a gay community appears to be a marginal component of the centripetal force exerted by the city on gays from Lombardy, even on those that have moved to Milan, who tended to insist on other aspects. What prominently emerges instead, is the characterisation of Milan as a reference point for disengaged leisure, for most gay people from the Lombard periphery, who tend to take part in the city nightlife and then retire in the province.

Results pointed out that Milan represents an attractive environment particularly at the beginning of the personal growth of gay men, corresponding to an early phase of the exploration of one's own sexuality. Later, the lure of the city gradually fades away for many: informants n.1, n.2, n.12, n.13, n.17, n.21, n.22, n.28, for different reasons, discomfort with the metropolitan gay community or with the metropolitan environment as a whole, look back at their initial fascination with detachment. In chapter 2 an influential paper by Annes and Redlin (2012) was presented, whose work made a point on how, for many rural gay men, the city remains unattractive, a transitory space, a “must-go-through” where they do not wish to spend their entire lives. The perceived “effeminizing power” of the city that challenges the attraction of Annes and Redlin's informants for this space, is an element that is undoubtedly present the discourses of some participants of the present research (informants n.1, n.6, n.22,

n.29), but the fieldwork conducted in Lombardy reveals a picture that is more complex than that.

Due to the necessity of containing the text within the limits imposed by formal requirements, it is not possible to discuss in detail all the features and cases that make the picture complex. The present research was conceived since the beginning as a exploratory study on a topic that was not previously investigated in the chosen spatial context, and therefore it was considered essential to report all findings including most of the sub-topics that were initially envisaged during the fieldwork, in the hope that the most interesting or the most ambiguous ones could provide fertile ground for further more specific investigation. In the frame of the present thesis, it was decided to prioritise two phenomena that will be illustrated in the next two short chapters. The choice did not depend on the fact that such phenomena are associated with particularly relevant (in terms of numbers) trends emerging from the evidence gathered in fieldwork, but rather on the fact that their original character adds new insights to the complex discourse about the relationship that gay men have with large metropolitan areas and with more marginal and peripheral settings. The novelty of the phenomena illustrated later is contingent on a widespread use of internet and above all dating-apps, in a post-rights context where sexuality and market logic are more tightly intertwined. A final mini-chapter containing some of the interesting evidence that emerged concerning the city of Milan will conclude the main body of the thesis, providing more inspiring insights for further research.

6. The city of homonormativity

“...Implicit rules of the jet-set in Milan impose a way of being that can be exhausting... Milan requires a presence, a top-level reworking of your way of being... You are confronted with very high standards [...] and it can be extremely stressful. Milan is a challenging context, makes you feel inadequate. [...] Presenteeism is overall associated with nightlife, we are talking about the most superficial aspects, like looks, the way you set yourself, body care... [...] also because that's a typical trait of the gay male world, to categorise with respect to physical and body type. People come together based on how they look. In Milan you find this to the nth degree, particularly regarding the aspect of fitness... sounds a bit US American, no? The culture of the gay man and the gym... Milan, well... top of the top, no?”

(Informant n.10)

The three guys whose experience is examined here are among the youngest that were interviewed. Two of them were 18 years old and had virtually no experience outside the houses of their parents. “Where I live is hell” said Informant n.11 referring to the sexist and homophobic climate that he claims to be predominant in the tiny mountain village where he grew up. While they tend to withdraw from the social life of their own local communities, they both expressed some degree of attraction or curiosity towards the metropolis and what it represents, confirming to be aware that “Milano is the place with more gays per square kilometre” (Informant n.11). However, it was interesting to see how their curiosity was overshadowed by feelings of discomfort and insecurity. “I wouldn't mind hang around in those places, but I don't think I belong there... – said Informant n.9 – That's more the place for those guys, jocks, short hair, the usual. No nerds with genderqueer haircuts like me”.

During the interviews, it emerged that the media through which they created their own representation of Milan and its community are mostly online social networks. Informant n.9 posited: “Maybe I'm just used to see those jocks, those clones everywhere on the internet, on flyers advertising gay nights, pictures of events...”. The picture that Informant n.11 displayed of his understanding of the LGBTQ+ community was a more positive one, but as he confessed, his representation is mediated by American podcasts and YouTubers that describe a reality and a community that has little to do with the Italian context. Informant n.11 has

never hung out in Milan and he only has a vague idea of it, as he only has a vague idea of Bologna, another city where the LGBTQ+ is thriving, because he “doesn't follow anyone on Instagram that is located there”.

It would be wrong to imagine these two young informants as completely extraneous to socialisation with other LGBTQ+ individuals in real life, though. This is true especially for Informant n.9, who was the youngest member of the 2019 Pride committee of the mid-sized town of Bergamo. For him activism and the dimension of the community are crucial and he is therefore attracted to the idea of the metropolitan community, but at the same time repulsed by it because of its perceived nature which he associates with toxic masculinity. In this regard, it is relevant to mention that the linguistic register of Informant n.11 frequently showed an inclination towards a more 'feminine language', deliberately avoiding to use male-gendered idiomatic expression that would be typical of the vernacular language of the area where he grew up. Such evidence clearly contrasts with what was argued by Annes and Redlin (2012) concerning the masculine identity of rural gay men and their fear of the effeminizing influence of the city.

On the contrary, the toxicity of the presumed jocks-dominated environment of Milan, as described by Informant n.9, was reinforced by the speech of Informant n.28, a 23 years old guy that in the past 3 years had been living and studying between Milan and his home-town, a small town in the province of Pavia. Despite his description of Milan as “a beacon of light where he could create a serene routine, away from the oppression of the family and the small town”, his experience within the gay community there so far has been far from positive. He described the people as superficial and unwelcoming: “There are those that are cool and those that are not. The first make the rules and you gotta follow them”. The “rules” he referred to are mainly aesthetic codes, concerning fashion but most importantly body image and fitness. The typically Milanese obsession for fitness was an element touched upon by other fieldwork participants too, like informants n.21, n.22 and n.23, who described the stereotypical gay person in Milan as someone who likes to show off to put other people down.

The experience of Informant n.28 seemed to confirm that the successful model of gay man in Milan today is that of the fit jock, which project his aesthetic aspirations on others and actively makes them feel bad about themselves through practices of body-shaming. According to Boso (2012), the mainstream narrative reproduces an urban-centric discourse on how a modern gay person should be like. It is interesting to note that Informant n.9 referred to the gays in Milan as to “clones”. In a book dedicated to gay gym culture, Alvarez (2010) discuss the concept of 'clone' applied to gay ideals and desires. It is a complex matter, but what is

crucial to mention here is that such model has a normative power and this is true especially in the context of a large metropolitan area such as Milan, where a critical mass of gay men creates the conditions for the establishment of rules and the exclusion of perceived outsiders within the same community.

Arguably, the 'fit jock' embodies and reflects what has been defined as homonormativity, namely the condition of normalisation of gay identity and culture and its assimilation into a heteronormative framework which is typical of most metropolitan contexts of the global north in the so- called 'post-rights era'. Remarkably, in the works of Duggan (2002), Manalansan (2005) and the others who followed, homonormativity is associated with neo-liberal politics and patterns of consumerism. The topic is extremely vast and complex and it will not be discussed in depth in this chapter, whose purpose is solely that of suggesting how the possibility of marketising (previously stigmatised) bodies and identities necessarily results in the affirmation of best selling models that typically coalesce in the neo-liberal city.

What has been revolutionary in terms of socialisation among gay men within the last decade is definitely the boom of location-aware dating apps like Grindr. The evidence produced by informant n.28 shows that, besides providing opportunities, Grindr might also create the conditions for a deeper isolation of gay individuals in the metropolis.

Informant n.28 claimed that he dated at least a hundred guys over the past three years in Milan. He became friend with one, maybe two. He blamed the superficiality that characterised each of these casual sexual encounters, asserting that such superficiality is what fundamentally undermines the possibility of establishing meaningful relationships within the gay world in Milan. In the metropolis the strikingly high number of users and the significant turnover rate result in a seemingly endless availability of hookups. Bonner-Thompson (2017) refers to it as “the meat market” in an article where he explores the regulatory practices that shape the production of embodied masculinities of Grindr users. “The meat market” actually represents the only gay 'space' that Informant n.28 has ever navigated with the purpose of establishing new contacts, since getting to know people through the app allows one to manage sexual practices from and in the home, often avoiding public space. The privatisation of sexual encounters has been addressed by Licoppe et al. (2017). Even though Informant n.28 showed some attachment to the idea of an abstract LGBTQ+ community he feels he is part of, he never hung out in what is today known as the “gay district” in Milan. When inquired about that, he confessed he has always been afraid of the judgement of the other gay people he

might find there, due to the fact that he was often targeted with insults and mean comments on his physical appearance by other Grindr users.

Practices of exclusion and discrimination embedded in the app have been recently investigated by a number of authors. Shield (2018) focused on Grindr's interface, on the discourses circulated by Grindr users in profile texts, and on user-to-user interactions in private messages. Conner (2019) has demonstrated how new technologies have reinforced existing cultural practices, and showed how body typing, ageism, racism, and HIV stigma are reproduced within gay men's self-performance on the app. Finally, Faris (2018) links practices of exclusion on Grindr with the construction of a market of gay consumerism that typically promotes the ideals of a toned, white, youthful and masculine body. After being confronted with the gay community online, Informant n.28 had to believe that his personal fault was that of not being fit enough. "Look, it happened to me yesterday for instance. Some random guy just texted me saying: you don't even see how ugly you are, you might even think you're handsome, but you're not. Then after an hour he blocked me, because I hadn't answered yet".

To date, Informant n.28 does not have a clear idea of the reasons that motivate such hateful comments towards him and he just ascribed such behaviour to the frustration of other users. He claims that negative experiences like his own are very common as he frequently discussed about that with people he came into contact with on other online platforms such as Twitter. Today he still believes that Milan represents his "beacon of light", but only from a professional point of view, and although he wishes to settle there permanently, he predicts that he will continue to avoid LGBTQ+ spaces in Milan for fear of being judged negatively. He never participated to a Pride parade in the metropolis, but he once participated to this kind of event in Pavia, a mid-sized town in southern Lombardy, close to his home-town.

The representation of an urban gay community as populated by fit, masculine and verbally aggressive men, which creates an excessive pressure on outsiders that have to conform to the same standard, which was discussed here, only emerged from a few interviews. Such picture, which does not necessarily correspond to the reality, is mediated by online social networks and dating apps that are thriving in the post-rights era. In this chapter, a link was made between the increasing use of Grindr, as a socialisation and dating tool, with homonormativity, which is typically embodied by the figure of the fit jock. Although the representation of the gay community of Milan as it was described here does not cover the whole complexity of it, we must acknowledge that digital media and dating apps, as they are embedded in a homonormative environment that is prone to exclusion, might have a

significant impact on the perception of gay men coming from the provinces. As a matter of fact, for some the city is not conceived as a place of liberation, but rather a place of constraint. In the next chapter, the experience of informant n.28 in Pavia will be the starting point to discuss what emerges as a possible alternative to the “city of homonormativity”, as it was referred to herein.

7. The alternative to the city of homonormativity

“...The quality of the people, not the quantity. Compared to Milan, you can find all ages. I mean, actually I've never been to the one in Milan because of my... I do not want to say 'traumatic experience' because it was not that traumatic after all, but you know... I just try to stay out from all of that... All of that world of our community there. In Pavia I thought it was like a real Pride should be. It makes you feel good about yourself, doesn't make you feel judged because of your height, your size, your body shape, your haircut. I had a lot of fun. It was good”.

(Informant n.28)

The paragraph above reports some of the words that informant n.28 shared about his experience of the Pride parade in the mid-sized town of Pavia, which he considers a positive turning point in his troubled relationship with the gay community. Pride parades are the most outstanding manifestations of queer visibility and they generally play an important role in the lives of many gay individuals. Although Di Felicianantonio (2016) examines various aspects that illustrate why Pride is still a space for political contention in Italy, including the hegemonic power of the Vatican and Catholic institutions in every aspect of social, economic and political life, some participants of the present research had critical accounts on the parade that is held in Milan specifically, and made a description of it that brings the capital city of Lombardy closer to other metropolises in Western/Global North countries. (See Brown 2007). Accounts were made on the mainstreaming commodification of the parade, which more and more evidently tend to prioritise normative masculinities and femininities, by informants n.3, n.12 and n.27, who in recent years collaborated to the creation of local Pride parades in other mid-sized towns of the region, with the overall purpose of creating a more inclusive environment.

The Pride in Pavia, that was so appreciated by an initially hesitant informant n.28, was organised for the first time in 2015, being the first parade of this kind with a local and a civic character, held in a small town that is not a regional capital. Informant n.27, a lawyer and drag-queen who participated to the organisation of the event since they very beginning, particularly insisted on the local dimension of the Pavia Pride, which every year is the final outcome of a massive work of cooperation between the local LGBTQ+ associations, the

citizenry and civic institutions, as well as a capillary presence in the territory of the province in question. It is interesting to notice that in 2017 the theme that was chosen for the Pavia Pride was precisely the “province”: what it means to be a LGBTQ+ person living in the province, as a result of life circumstances or proud personal choices. Informant n.27 remembers it to be a particularly unifying theme, since stories were shared and collectively discussed by people whose struggle for serenity and visibility is intertwined with familiar elements that are not just experiences, but also places and points of reference. Informants (n.2, n.31) that had participated to Pride parades both in Milan and in the provinces where they grew up (Brescia and Bergamo respectively) emphasised the role that the “familiarity of place” has in activating a different set of emotions. Whereas in Milan their presence was exceptional and thus the dimension of the disruption was predominant, collectively performing queerness in a familiar environment implies being confronted with the relationship one has constructed with the place through his entire lifetime, and that can be marked by negative experiences of shame. While travelling somewhere to participate to Pride events entails rejection of past negative experiences that are associated to one's personal growth, publicly performing queerness in the home-town implies coming to terms with those experiences at the same time. Informant n.31 said: “even though I hate it there, that's where I am from. I was scared, but I was proud too. It hit different”.

Informant n.31 made choices that eventually brought him far away from his village, but other participants discussed the reason why they believe that gay life and communities are better in the province than in the metropolis. Informant n.27 used to to Milan occasionally, when he was a student in Pavia, and found the community dimension of LGBTQ+ spaces located there insufficient and unfulfilling.

“In Milan one goes to any LGBTQ+ venue and... he might stay all night all alone, with nobody even talking to him. If there is no strong association behind it... Obviously, there are LGBTQ+ associations in Milan, but mostly you find bars, clubs, nights... with no real sense of community”.

(Informant n.27)

He then compared the gay life of the metropolis with gay socialisation taking place in Pavia in the frame of the association he has been collaborating with for years.

“Our socialising events, every Tuesday night: that is what it means to be a real community. Someone who comes for the first time will never feel lonely, because there will always be volunteers to welcome him, to introduce him to other people.”

(Informant n.27)

One interesting aspect of Pavia is that, contrary to Milan, where the offer in terms of gay venues and events is extensive, LGBTQ+ life coincides with the life of the local LGBTQ+ association. Informant n.27 said:

“We organise everything, Pride is only the tip of the iceberg, a small part of a massive and constant work we bring forward here in Pavia, but elsewhere in the province too. We try to be as close as possible to all citizenry, so we organise initiatives in the small towns and villages around here: Voghera, Vigevano, Mortara, Broni, Stradella... In Pavia LGBTQ+ life is the life of the association, there is nothing that is not linked to it. And I believe this is great. Socialising with other gay people within the frame of our initiatives gives everyone a sense of what a community is. People do not just have fun... they grow, they learn to be inclusive and supportive to others.”

(Informant n.27)

Practical aspects of doing activism were another element that some participants identified to explain why for them the smaller, more familiar dimension of a smalltown LGBTQ+ community is ideal. Informant n.3 compared his political experience in Milan and in Bergamo, where he comes from, stressing out how a complex series of circumstances and power dynamics result in a fundamentally immobile environment in Milan, where LGBTQ+ associations with a political agenda are becoming less visible as a result.

“Milan is delirium... You are confronted with large numbers. Who get things started? Whom do you talk to? When? How do you overcome all the shit and disagreements between assemblies, that have layered over the years? Too many groups with complex relationships and no enthusiasm for sitting down and start a constructive dialogue. In Bergamo this kind of problems are less critical, because you know personally the people you are dealing with. The queer community doing activism... It's the same people you already fought a lot of battles with...”

(Informant n.3)

Gray (2009), in her analysis of LGBTQ+ politics in rural Kentucky made an interesting point about rural lesbian and gay activists who, lacking the resources to mobilise capital and people that are generally available in urban LGBTQ+ communities, relies on different strategies and alliances to achieve their goals. An example of this can be found in the personal experience of informant n.3, who recalls the origin of a local committee formed by queers and people affiliated with social centres (*centri sociali*), which are structure promoting direct political participation and alternative forms of non-commodified sociability, traditionally associated with radical leftist politics. Informant n.3 called this a very interesting social experiment, claiming that in Milan it would be inconceivable to have something like this happening.

As a matter of fact, the overall apolitical character of much gay life in Milan was regarded negatively by those that struggle to keep their battle in peripheral provinces of Lombardy. For informants n.3, n.12 and n.27, creating solid LGBTQ+ communities in the province entails a more or less explicit resistance to market logic. A critique that was often directed to Milanese LGBTQ+ venues that are regarded as excessively commercial and profit-oriented is the dismissal of practices to create the “safe space”, namely a set of rules and practices to ensure that all LGBTQ+ folks are having a comfortable experience. According to informant n.3, the dismissal of such practices results in an environment that encourages normative (macho) masculinities to thrive in a full-fledged competition that tend to exclude individuals that do not meet the standards or express their identities in different ways. In their interviews, informant n.3 and n.12 described some of the most common “safe space” practices that were set in place during events organised in the area of Bergamo, that resulted in fully LGBTQ+ inclusive environments despite being co-organised by non-queer collectives, in circumstantial cross-boundaries alliances that can be found in the research of Gray (2009) too. According to the informants, the inclusive character of LGBTQ+ events organised in the province is associated with a degree of heterogeneity that cannot be found in Milan, where a critical mass of LGBTQ+ folks allows the existence of separate (market) niches where people choose where to go based on their set of preferences. It is interesting to notice that informant n.4, in order to highlight this multitude of scenes, referred to the gay community in Milan as a “hydra of Lerna”, giving to it a monstrous connotation.

The rejection of this concept brought informant n.12 to engage in collaboration with non-queer formations based in his area, a mountain valley in the province of Bergamo, with the purpose of creating an alternative queer space for local LGBTQ+ people in the frame of a renovation project of a former elementary school. For informant n.12 the project is of

particular importance due to the fact that he strongly identifies with the concerned place, where he situates his personal roots. Moreover, personal connections due to local community membership and close familiarity with other actors and are tied to the territory facilitate the successful cooperation that Gray (2009) identifies as a characteristic trait of rural LGBTQ+ politics.

Undoubtedly, the deep-rooted attachment to the territory is one aspect that emerged from the discourses of those participants that are keen on proposing an alternative to the metropolitan gay lifestyle. “For those who want to stay” was the slogan of the 2017 Pavia Pride. Gorman-Murray (2009) lists attachment to one's place of origin and place-based community among the relevant aspects to consider when discussing queer mobilities in the post-rights era. According to informant n.3, the recent striking success of Pride parades held in peripheral provinces of Lombardy is a demonstration that gays of the periphery have a different way of intending “frociety”, as he called the queer community, that brings them to value more the idea of feeling at home in a familiar place, “rather than being forced to disrupt their routine and go to Milan to be able to perform some queerness”.

One last aspect that is worth being mentioned here is the missionary spirit that seems to live in the gay activists in the province. Participants expressed great satisfaction for having been able to create a “queer safe space” and the right atmosphere in unusual places and in perceived hostile environments, showing particular excitement at the idea of contamination, namely the queer presence in non-queer venues, friendly co-existence of the two groups and queering straight space. (Informant n.3). Moreover, the idea of creating opportunities of queer visibility with the precise purpose of bothering homophobic neighbours was another source of excitement (informant n.12).

This chapter introduced a political dimension that was rather overlooked in previous sections, since the object of the research was more the general experience of men belonging to the dispersed gay community in Lombardy. Drawing comparisons between the city, where he currently lives, and the province where he was originally from, informant n.5 synthesised that, whereas in a city like Milan the gay community seems to be more united by an ideal of lifestyle, in peripheral provinces, for those that are out and proud, the dimension of militancy seems to be more relevant. However, it would be reductive to associate gay life in peripheral provinces to militancy only. Informant n.18, who has run the only gay bar in Bergamo for the last 20 years, traced the history of gay venues in the area, considering the ones that existed before his, that from the early 90s to present days were a point of reference seemingly for all

gay men of the province and beyond. Remarkably, informant n.18 insisted on the fact that, when he opened his activity in 1999, there was not much in Milan, in terms of gay life, incredibly less compared to present days. Even though the gay landscape of the capital city of Lombardy was not the subject of the present research, some evidence about the peculiarities of Milan that emerged from fieldwork will be briefly mentioned in the next short chapter, which might provide useful insights for further research, if nothing else.

8. Final considerations on Milan

Investigating the relationship that participants of all ages have with the city of Milan, especially as an imagined space, with the expectations and desires that are associated to it, raises the question of the evolution of the city's attractiveness over the years, which could be alone the object of a different research. Some of the evidence gathered during fieldwork seem to suggest that generally Milan was not considered a particularly attractive place until very recent times, which would put the capital city of Lombardy on a completely different level compared to North-American metropolises for the role they had in the gay imagination (Weston 1995).

What was stated by n.18, that “there was not much going on in Milan back in the 90s”, confirmed the point of informant n.5 and n.10, who talked about “right-wing obscurantism”, “sense of demise” and “a city that was bogged down” in the general perception until 2011 approximately, when a significant political change made a breakthrough. Moreover, despite the city offering more favourable conditions for the anonymity of homosexuals, and opportunities in sectors that have long been considered ideal niches for many gay people, namely fashion and communication, a less stereotypical gay underworld and hidden life has always existed and thrived in the province, as evidenced by informants n.19a,b. The oldest couple of informants shared stories of their gay adventures in the 70s, which most frequently took place in the most peripheral areas: the wild along the rivers, far from the metropolis. Cruising on the river banks in the countryside has been the norm in the heteronormative society of Lombardy for decades and it is an ongoing phenomenon still nowadays, as reported by informant n.27.

According to the results of the present research, it is plausible to believe that the younger generations today tend to express a worse relationship with their place of origin situated in the province and conversely they are attracted to the idea of the life (or at least the nightlife) in the big city. Comparing the younger generations with those who preceded them suggests indeed that the attractiveness of Milan to gay people is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Soggiu (2015), who examined alleged gay neighbourhoods within the Milanese urban space, merely maps the concentration of LGBTQ+ commercial and cultural activities. Soggiu (2015) fails to investigate in depth the process of formation and successions of “gay districts”, particularly as products of collective imagination, presumably because his research dates back

to a period when Porta Venezia, the neighbourhood that most participants of the present research identify as the prime place of their gay experiences in the metropolis today, was not as popular as it has become in very recent years. Despite the existence of an increasingly popular narrative that equates Porta Venezia to well-known gay district in European capitals (Chueca in Madrid, Marais in Paris, Soho in London)², which also makes romantic use of element such as the former presence of a lazaretto in the area³, perhaps in the attempt of using the genius loci as a tool for place-branding, the first LGBTQ+ bar in Porta Venezia only dates back to 2006.

In 2019 the most important LGBTQ+ association in Milan organised an exhibition providing documentation on the formation process of what was known as the gay street in the 90s, bordering the central train station, long before Porta Venezia rose as top gay destination in the city. Informant n.26, who happened to hang around the former gay street when he was young, gave a representation of it that recalls the description of the dark sketchy gutters where homosexuality is found in association with prostitution and other type of deviant or anti-social behaviour according to the bourgeois morality. On the other hand, the description of Porta Venezia made by informant n.10 conveys an idea of brightness, as opposed to the dark, and it is made of trendy bars and pedestrianised streets that make it an attractive urban space for seemingly everyone, regardless of sexual orientation.

Although it might be hazardous to associate the success of the brand new gay district to the rejection (by young generations) of idea of homosexuality as difference, as suggested by informant n.5, it is interesting to notice that, whereas older participants, like informant n.13, still referred to the former gay district, when describing their personal experience in Milan, some of the younger participants had no idea that such a thing had even existed. Informant n.37 had never heard of Via Sarmatini (the former gay street), but he confessed that he decided to move to Milan after “falling in love” with the Italian rapper Myss Keta, whose song “Le Ragazze Di Porta Venezia” (the girls of Porta Venezia), released in 2016, made him think: “this is where I need to be”.

Unfortunately, this last short chapter cannot exhaust the question of the attractiveness that Milan has exerted towards gay men over the years, since the (scarce) evidence that was collected in this regard does not allow an extensive discussion on the matter. Nevertheless, it was considered important to briefly mention some of the few things that emerged from fieldwork in this regard, as a potential new focus for a different research. The possibility of an

2 “Porta Venezia LGBT”. See Web references 1.

3 “Il lazaretto è la contaminazione di Porta Venezia”. See Web references 2.

increasing attractiveness of Milan for gay people, associated with the place-branding of a formerly non-queer area, and embodied at the urban level by the fall of a gay district which express a certain idea of homosexuality and the rise of another, carrying a different image, could be an interesting topic for another in-depth research in the field of urban studies.

9. Conclusion

The present thesis attempts to integrate and enrich the debate on rural sexual minorities and their personal understandings, through the production of new evidence from Italy, a context where the LGBTQ+ population and human geography have never been linked by any research before. Hypothesis and theories previously made by (mostly) American scholars on the topic of rural sexual minorities and queer migration constituted a necessary element of confrontation, allowing the rise on questions, mainly in the form of assumptions that required to be verified in the new case study. However, the original character of the present investigation in Italy implied a preliminary general research to gain a basic understanding of the relationship that men of the dispersed gay community in Lombardy have with their place of origin versus the metropolis. The main results discussed in previous chapters are summarised in the following.

Remarkably, a variable that was initially expected to be relevant, namely the degree of remoteness/isolation of small villages, did not result to have a significant impact, since no explicit trends could be identified in that regard. On the other hand, the degree of “outness” of participants has generally proved to be influential on the way gay people make sense of place. Beyond the clear-cut dichotomy out/non-out, it was observed that the diverse degree of importance that “being gay” assumes in each individual identity is the factor that most influences the participants' experiences, affecting their relationship with the environment where they grew up and shaping their attitude towards the big city. Our analysis showed that scholars doing research on gay men often treat them as a monolithic block and neglect to take the nuances of their gay identity into consideration, producing a sample that confirms their hypothesis, but fails to reflect a much more complex reality. The sample of the present research includes a spectrum that goes from the closeted individual marked by heteronormativity to the individual whose life revolves around his queerness, and results show that it is one's position in the spectrum that has the highest chances to determine whether the gay person in question is attached/repulsed by the environment where he grew up and to what extent he is attracted to the idea of the metropolis.

Whereas the dimension of sexuality was confirmed to be the key-feature to understand the attractive power exerted by the metropolis towards most gay men coming from villages and small towns, the average young age of participants expressing fascination for the big city seem to suggest that the attractiveness of Milan for gay men is a relatively recent

phenomenon. Based on our evidence, Milan would have aligned to the trend of Western metropolises, becoming an attractive gay destination and a point of reference, only within the last decade. Results show that, whereas gay nightlife in Milan is a fixed course for seemingly everyone, attended to some extent even by those who are hostile to the idea of the big city in general terms, nearly anybody associates the metropolis to the idea of safe space or engage with the city in ways other than disengaged leisure, leaving aside the community dimension. Findings like this one clash with the common assumptions on the relationship that gay men have with large metropolitan areas, which are associated to the idea of a quest for community, as seen in Weston (1995), and could be regarded as a consequence of the late development of Milan as a gay-friendly hub for the masses.

This consideration led to the the deepening of two phenomena in particular, that are contingent on a widespread use of internet and above all dating-apps, in a post-rights context where sexuality and market logic are more tightly intertwined. Their new and original character could make them the ideal subject of a specific and more in-depth research.

The first phenomenon concerns the youngest generation of gay men. Their embeddedness in virtual LGBTQ+ communities which overcomes the need of being part of a place-based LGBTQ+ community to be socialised with gay peers suggests that online gay culture will increasingly play a role in disrupting the meaning that large metropolitan areas have in the gay culture and imagination. In chapter 6 it was shown how the contemporary virtual environment can negatively affect the perception of smalltown young gay men, whose fear of an excessively challenging and competitive metropolitan standard can lead to an experience of constraint, rather than one of liberation, in the city.

The second deeper focus aimed to introduce a reflection on the community-centred alternative to the competition of bodies, or “meat market” (Bonner & Thompson 2017) that is found in the metropolis, by examining the experience of participants that are activists in peripheral provinces of Lombardy, where the dimension of militancy is still relevant and actually increasing its importance, as demonstrated by the recent success of local “townspride” parades.

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Appendix

Table 1 provides basic informations on the interviews that were conducted between July and September 2019 in Lombardy. The parts in colour (yellow and blue) contain the basic information of each one of the informants that were involved. The column “Mobility” highlights the relocation choices of the participants, where S stands for “small town”, M stands for “mid-sized town” and L for “large metropolitan area”. The arrow suggests movement. (r) identifies the localities that were classified as remote during the analysis. The last column on the right informs whether the informants are out, as in openly gay, or closeted (to at least one close family member).

Table 1: Interviews and participants

	Date and site of the interview	Contact	Informant number	Age	Occupation	Mobility	Out
1	04/07/19 Bergamo	Acquaintance	n.1	20	Student (art)	S	✓
2	05/07/19 Bergamo	Acquaintance	n.2	24	Student (languages)	S(r) → M	✓
3	05/07/19 Bergamo	Acquaintance	n.3	30	Unemployed	M	✓
4	06/07/19 Milan	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.4	23	Student (fashion)	S(r) → L	✓
5	06/07/19 Milan	Acquaintance	n.5	30	Contributor, webcontent, social-media manager	S(r) → L	✓
6	08/07/19 Bergamo	Acquaintance	n.6	23	Student (economics)	M	X
7	08/07/19 Bergamo	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.7	19	High-school student	M	✓

8	08/07/19 Albano S. Alessandro	Found at LGBTQ+ event	n.8	22	Student (philosophy)	S	✓
9	10/07/19 Bergamo	Found through the Bergamo Pride committee	n.9	18	High-school student	S	✓
10	10/07/19 Bergamo	Acquaintance	n.10	39	High-school teacher	$S(r) \rightarrow S$	✓
11	11/07/19 Bergamo	Through informant n.9	n.11	18	High-school student	$S(r)$	✓
12	12/07/19 Albino	Through informant n.3	n.12	24	Librarian	$S \rightarrow L \rightarrow S$	✓
13	12/07/19 Albino	Grindr	n.13	53	Driver	$S(r) \rightarrow S$	X
14	13/07/19 Bergamo	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.14	68	Professor	M	X
15	14/07/19 Bergamo	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.15	37	Council member	M	✓
16	15/07/19 Bergamo	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.16	34	Member of parliament	M	✓
17	16/07/19 Bergamo	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.17	54	Lawyer	$S(r) \rightarrow M$	✓
18	16/07/19 Bergamo	Found at the local gay bar in Bergamo	n.18	54	bartender	M	✓
19	16/07/19 Bergamo	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.19a	75	Taylor	$S \rightarrow M$	✓
			n.19b	72	Architect	M	✓
20	18/07/19 Bergamo	Grindr	n.20a	38	Translator	$L \rightarrow M$	✓
			n.20b	36	Technician	$S(r) \rightarrow M$	✓
21	19/07/19 Bergamo	Grindr	n.21	32	Manager	S	✓
22	20/07/19 Bergamo	Acquaintance	n.22	24	Student (Communication)	S	X

23	22/07/19 Carona	Grindr	n.23	24	Student (Fashion)	$S(r) \rightarrow L \rightarrow S(r)$	✓
24	23/07/19 (virtual)	Grindr	n.24	23	Student (Engineering)	$S(r)$	X
25	24/07/19 Carona	Grindr	n.25	28	Dam technician	$S(r)$	X
26	02/08/19 Milan	Through informant n.5	n.26	46	DJ, art director	$S \rightarrow L$	✓
27	03/08/19 Pavia	Through informant n.17	n.27	33	Lawyer	$S \rightarrow M$	✓
28	03/08/19 Pavia	Grindr	n.28	23	Student (Communication)	S	✓
29	06/08/19 Curno	Grindr	n.29	37	Chemist	$S(r) \rightarrow S$	✓
30	08/08/19 Ghedi	Grindr	n.30	56	Soldier	$S \rightarrow S$	✓
31	16/08/19 Bergamo	Acquaintance	n.31	23	Visual merchandiser	$S \rightarrow L$	✓
32	17/08/19 Mozzo	Through informant n.31	n.32	25	Student (art)	$S \rightarrow L$	✓
33	20/08/19 Bergamo	Through informant n.31	n.33	22	Student (design)	S	✓
34	22/08/19 Bergamo	Through informant n.31	n.34a	26	Civil employee	S	✓
			n.34b	28	Cook	$S(r) \rightarrow L \rightarrow S(r)$	X
35	03/09/19 Milan	Through a mutual acquaintance	n.35	30	Bartender	$S \rightarrow L$	✓
36	06/09/19 Milan	Through informant n.17	n.36	33	Lawyer, author	$S \rightarrow L$	✓
37	06/09/19 Milan	Through informant n.28	n.37	24	Social-media manager	$S \rightarrow M \rightarrow L$	X

The following tables correspond to the macro themes that formed the backbone of the analysis. The evidence was classified and allocated in different tables so that participants,

their vision and their experiences could be compared with one another on the same topic. It was eventually decided to include this series of tables in the appendix, rather than the full transcription of the interviews, because the key-elements of the evidence for each participant are summarised in schematic bullet-points and therefore easier to read. However, the full transcription of all 37 interviews is available in a separate document.

Table 2: Place of origin

1	• Medium town • Not very attached to it • always dodged people and social situations, though the people was not very stimulating • at first was very looking forward to just leave. Recently re-evaluated the place.
2	• Small village quite remote • very attached to it, very attached to the characteristic of the small village and community in general • wishes to go back and stay
3	• Medium town • identify first and foremost with the neighbourhood he grew up in, strong sense of belonging • likes the medium town, thinks as gay person you enjoy it better compared to Milan.
4	• Small village in the middle of the countryside • says there is not much, and calls it very traditional and catholic conservative • believes it is so unsophisticated compared to Milan
5	• Small village in the countryside • considers this a banal example of rich province • always thought it was boring. Scared of dying there, couldn't wait to get out • Would never go back to the countryside. Boredom and FOMO.
6	• Medium town, strong neighbourhood dimension • Likes it, no significant sense of belonging, but definitely appreciate the dimension of the small town. In the future would prefer something even smaller, definitely not a big city.
7	• Small village bordering a medium town • sense of belonging and attachment with the medium town in general. Considers it home, always happy to come back. • He finds it a bit boring or dead sometimes • when it comes to gay life it is ok nevertheless, brings up pupa e scintilla
8	• Village close to medium town

	- negligible sense of belonging - pupa e scintilla as a significant experience in his personal growth
9	- village close to a medium town. - Doesn't hate it, doesn't love it either. Think it is quite grotesque/lame. Wishes to leave, maybe for going abroad
10	- Small village in the countryside - says it's isolated - as a child never thought he belonged anywhere - chose to move back to a similar setting just because it was more practical, and because of proximity to Milan - says "il territorio dove sono nato è una croce da sempre e tutt'oggi è un problema"
11	- Small Village in the mountain. Remote - hell - wishes to leave as soon as possible
12	- Village in the mountain - calm, peace, a certainty, attached to the place where he grew up - had travelled a lot and lived in different places, but always wishes to go back, it is a safe harbour
13	- Small village in the mountain - loves the quality of place, the calm, the silence, feels safe
14	- Medium town - appreciates it
15	- Medium town - identifies with it, likes the neighbourhood familiar environment. Attached to the the life of the local community. Feels at home. - engages with the community, involved in local politics
16	- Medium town - very attached to it, strong sense of territorial belonging
17	- Village in the countryside - says it's a shithole - doesn't go back
18	Medium town
19	- Village next to a medium town - when he discovered being gay didn't have any opportunity of confrontation in the village and spent a couple of sad years. - later medium town with c.
	- Medium town - appreciates the dimension of the medium town, doesn't take much to get to know it well and live it to the fullest - praises the proximity with the metropolis however very important
20	- Village in the countryside - emotionally attached to the place, its people, his family

	• goes back to see his family very often
21	• Village in the mountain • not at all attached to it • quite an annoying location, but already has a house to live on his own, can't be bothered. Decided to stay • doesn't stay much at home, only goes there to sleep, but otherwise often visiting friends elsewhere • still, likes the dimension of the small village, particularly for the availability of space
22	• Village next to a medium town • calls it home • attached to the idea of it, reminds him of childhood, good memories, beautiful things
23	• Village in the mountain. Very remote • nice place, but offers little if you want to have a career. • Likes to go back, to see family and friends.
24	• Small village close to a medium town • likes the place: dimension of the village, tranquillity, childhood, home. • Very happy when he comes back after a holiday: feelings of safety and tranquillity.
25	• Small village in the mountain. Very remote • likes it, but says there's not much. Still, prefers to stay there
26	• Small town in the mountain. Remote • hates it • says it does not develop in anyway • no place for someone like him (with ambition?) • for many years after he left he didn't come back (except a few hours to meet his parents), total rejection
27	• Small town • grey, dead, sad, lack of colours. • No attachment at all, everything is better than that.
28	• Small town • calm, peaceful, good when you come back from the chaos of the metropolis • otherwise pretty dead, a place for old people • doesn't wish to stay
29	• Small village in the mountain, remote • defines it "pleasant village" with some sarcasm • calm, spacious, open air
30	• Small town in the countryside • left it when he was young, not attached to the memory of it at all
31	• Small village bordering a medium town

	• defines it "paesino di merda" • isolated
32	• Small village bordering a medium town • not at all attached to the place • believes the high-school experience in the medium town was very important for his growth as an open minded person, free from prejudices.
33	• Village in the countryside • Used to like it more in the past, now considers it oppressive
34	• Village in the countryside • feels at ease • says he has his roots there • politically engaged for his local community • attached to traditions and recurring local events where all the community is involved • envisions a future in the area
	• Small village in the mountain. Remote • not at all attached to it • Jokingly says he would have committed suicide if he had stayed • wishes to leave again soon
35	• Small town in the countryside • calm but boring • would never go back
36	• Village in the hinterland of Milan • Not at all attached to the place • A few episodes of homophobic mockery in the streets there, but nothing much
37	• Village next to a small town, far from the metropolis • says the whole environment is quite backwards • there is nothing

Table 3: Community of Origin

1	• Some tension with family, but not much linked to sex orientation • not attached to the community, but didn't have many problems. Some episodes, but he's quite chill about it. Wouldn't influence his life choices in terms of place anyway.
2	• Good relationship with family overall • very strong ties with the friends he grew up with. They are a very cohesive crew

3	- The provincial nature of the city is reflected in the attitude of people, who do not know how to behave, especially in festive circumstances. Nevertheless, he identifies with the community. - Appreciates what he calls the "frociety" of the medium town
4	- Doesn't have any more relationship with the people from his village since he left - when he goes back home doesn't step beyond the garden - says people have betrayed him. He is very bitter about people in the country in general - he is still very tied to his family
5	- Says he was never friend with the cool guys, who were the average bullies who end up doing nothing in life later, flaunting a certain kind of masculinity - was supported by family
6	- Very attached to his family - his friends are still people of the neighbourhood he grew up with
7	Good relationship with family
8	- Good relationship with family - even in high-school he was out and proud and flamboyant - since he started university in Milan all his social life moved there, only goes back to the small town to sleep at night, but doesn't hang out much anymore
9	- Not hurt, but not particularly attached to the community either. Almost no relationship with them anymore, no social life. People greet him cause they know his parents, he doesn't remember who they are. - Wishes to leave - contrary to the big city, thinks the small city can be dangerous and violent towards gay people. Not the village, though. Doesn't feel safe in the village because people know him. Not a matter of safety really, more matter of comfort/shame. Can't be fully himself in the place where he grew up.
10	- His family was isolated and withdrew from the local community: sense of non-belonging and alienation in respect to the local community - changed school multiple times, partially due to his sexuality being conceived as a problem and consequent negative attitude towards him - general mistrust towards the community everywhere he goes
11	- Tiny remote village, Always the same people, sarcastic about them being the good people. - Doesn't feel good in any social situation in the village. Says people are racist, sexist, homophobic. For the most part of his life didn't even want to make friends or go out cause he didn't want to see these people. (although he says he's very extrovert). - Scared even of older gay people in the area cause they might talk to his parents, doesn't see them as friends - conflict with his family over him being gay and eccentric and showing off
12	- Feels loved and respected by the community of his village. Sometimes they are not even much friends, but he feels sort of affection for them anyway. - Still, not totally free to do whatever he wants (removed pride flag from the wall

	to avoid that the neighbour sees that), but after a period when he was just very aggressive imposing his new self, he's now more willing to compromise, doesn't mind that.
13	- Attached to the idea of being in good terms and in contact with the local (straight) community of the area where he grew up. - Fear of being excluded from the community, its public life, celebrations, rituals.
14	Claims that he didn't have any problem with family or others due to his sexual orientation, but that was never a topic of conversation
15	
16	- Identifies with the local community - engaged in local politics
17	- Was not out to his family when he was young. - When he moved out he cut ties everyone in the village where he grew up
18	
19	- Not explicitly out with his parents, says it would be unnecessarily violent to tell them, and they knew it anyway... - says he never had problems, also because his homo is not that evident - remember an uncomfortable episode which happened when they were living together already. Brilliantly solved. They were well respected.
	- Says that growing up homo was super, was never confronted with marginalisation or any kind of small discomfort or bothered anyhow. - They have good relationship with their neighbours - they were the first gay couple legally united by the municipality in 2016 as soon as it became possible.
20	- Still attached to the community of the place he grew up in - however, could never confront anyone when it comes to homosexuality - family and friends didn't officially know that until recently
21	- Not at all attached to the local community - says they are bigots, ignorants - episodes of mocking, but says he doesn't care - difficult relationship with a younger homophobic cousin that has threatened him in the past. He reported him to the police
22	- Hardly in touch with the people of his community in general - good relationship with family, although not out with his father yet. They still live together though.
23	Good relationship with the community of his small village
24	- Good relationship with family, although he's not out to them (or to anybody) - no relationship at all with the people in the village he lives in. - Seriously hurt by bullying during adolescence. Not masculine enough (voice) He doesn't think he's effeminate, feels very masculine instead, and thinks it's important he's considered as such.

25	• Not out
26	• People are narrow minded and this will never change • thinks that being gay was good because it gave him the right motivation to leave everything behind • perceived as suffocating the idea of having to mingle with the same 2-3 gay guys in the area just because there was nobody else • claims he has no resentment towards that community, although...it does really sound like that
27	• Village mentality: everybody know each other, don't be too eccentric or extra, be good boys and good girls not to be attacked or criticised. Close mentality, place for old people. • Always felt like the black sheep, felt lonely
28	• Backwards, narrow-minded people. Do not express themselves in a straightforward manner, but rather talk behind your back and make atrocious choices. • Apart from some friends, doesn't have much contact with them anymore • conflicting relationship with his parents about him not being straight.
29	• Small community, everybody knows each other • see pros and cons of such tight relationship with neighbours
30	• Homo was never a possibility • left early when he was 18 for the military, rarely goes back
31	• Small community, everybody knows each-other • perceived that as suffocating, was always instinctively repulsed by local community life • narrow mindedness • suffered at home alone
32	• Says neighbours are narrow minded people generally, with whom he doesn't share much • not much in contact with the people anymore • remarkably, back in the days he had his first lgbt crew in the medium town: some people from high-school, some others were casual encounters at the local gay bar • very attached to his family
33	• Local community can be oppressive, everybody knows everything and it would be impossible to keep some privacy. People talk too much. • Uneasy relationship with family, especially with the mother. The relationship cooled down after coming out. Homo is not a topic of conversation. The problem is what people think.
34	• Considers the local community HIS community • friendly familiar relationship and daily interactions with everyone • politically engaged for the community
	• Doesn't have much contact with the people in the local community • says that people are narrow minded • distant with his family.

35	• Average people are old and narrow-minded • Doesn't recall particularly uncomfortable episodes, but in general can't compare to Milan
36	• Not at all part of the local community, used to go to school in Milan always • some episodes of mockery in the streets, but nothing much
37	• Says that homosexuality is not something not even thought out, a taboo.

Table 4: Metropolis as a Fantased Place

1	• Milan as a imagined paradise in an early exploratory phase of his homosexuality • as this phase is over, perception of the city changes and becomes more uncomfortable
2	• Instinctively repulsed by the large metropolitan area, which is an alienating place, where you get lost, chaotic, you feel lonely.
3	
4	• Chose the place (the metropolis) first, what to do in it only afterwards • always been attracted. As a way of liberating himself. From the nothing of the countryside, but also sexually speaking, although that was more implicit and and only happened slowly and gradually
5	• Always been fascinated by the chaos and the rhythm of the big city, the nightlife, both in terms of scene and for the idea of the city where nothing stops, ecosystem is complex and in the night it keeps working
6	• When asked about big cities instinctively associate them with high numbers of gay people • Repulsed by the metropolis: scared about the chaos, the rhythm, but also by the nightlife. Says Milan at night is a place of perdition
7	• Attracted to Milan because of confusion, many people, diversity... • the gay dimension of the metropolis does not play a role • imagines a future there
8	• After coming out and the first exploration of his identity Milan became "the gay city" and an inevitable gay destination for everyone. Compares it to the small town, where one gay night per month is not enough
9	• Scared of the frenetic rhythm of the city • curious about the wide diversity of people and ways of life he could encounter there. (Bored of cis-crowd of the small town, wishes to meet more eccentric queer identities) • safe space, where you can do whatever you want without people judging your gayness • scared of the competitive vibe of the metropolis, fear that he doesn't fit. Thinks

	the big city is a place for fit jocks looking like clones of each other. Perceptions gained through the use of internet where he finds events etc.
10	• Since an early age Milan was a city full of promises
11	• Metropolis as the place with more gay people per square km • more vibrant community • big, many people, high degree of diversity • more freedom of movement • wishes to try, really needs to try a change • thinks he would live with less anxiety and would feel more free in his interaction with people. Thinks the metropolis is more tolerant to diversity.
12	• Desired the life in the big city, like that seen in movies • desired of being in a place with more gays to experience a more meaningful connection with his peers (Grindr in the country? No thanks)
13	• Mainly associate the city with chaos, noise, danger. Scared of migrants.
14	• No metropolitan fantasy • Milan and the gay community linked in his imaginary to the aids pandemic
15	
16	
17	• Back then Milan was not very attractive • Initially was more fascinated by New York, where he start to explore a few places out of curiosity... • fascinated by the idea of the metropolis at 20, less at 50
18	
19	
20	• (20b:) Milan as a diverse city, where people come from different places
21	• Chaotic, dangerous, lack of space • good expectations in terms of opportunities to have fun with other gay guys
22	• Big city, many more opportunities for fun • Idyllic vision of a place full of people like him
23	
24	
25	• Knows there is “movida”, he claims he likes that, but not attracted, actually never goes. Maybe scared? Doesn't think he fit or belong? Shy? • Knows there's gay people, whereas there's nobody in his village. This doesn't seem to be enough however.
26	• Attracted by chaos, shops, crowd... the opposite of the small town where he grew up • particularly attracted to the nightlife
27	• Not attracted to the chaos, the excessive dimension, the prices, the frenetic

	rhythm.
28	- Initially scared about Milan, a chaotic, violent, a place to escape from - at the same time: a beacon of light, a way-out to escape the oppressive routine of the small town, far from home, free to express identity and sexuality
29	- Initially not attracted to it - scared by the large dimension, where people are only minding their own business, less social contact. You don't stop people you know in the street, rhythm too frenetic - today more attracted, but says he can't afford it
30	No metropolitan fantasy
31	- Milan as the capital city of fashion - Milan as the Italian version of the American dream - Promised land, dream land, place of endless possibilities (unchanged opinion)
32	Attracted by larger cities because of the diversity, people coming from different places. Generic "big city life" expectations.
33	- Repulsed by the idea of Milan - traffic, frenetic rhythm, nervous city users (he doesn't like the "unexpected")
34	- Diffidence, suspicion - perceives it as something very far (although it's not) - thinks he would feel lonely living in the metropolis
	Attracted by the crowd
35	- A place where he could be free, where people can be themselves - says Milan was an outlet for many people coming from the hinterland and from the countryside - originally from Rio, expected Milan to be the same type of safe space for gay people
36	
37	- Was fascinated by the songs by MYSS KETA and therefore fascinated by what he thought to be the cool vibe in Milan - Milan as a place to escape, plenty of new opportunities

Table 5: Metropolis as an Experienced Place

1	Hasn't done much, never been into a gay club or night in Milan
2	- Between 17 and 20 used to go to Milan for nightlife at least twice a month - knows a number of gay bars and clubs, but he's more attached to the more local scene of the province he comes from.

3	• Been regular at events • Believes the scene in Milan is way too commercial and lacking in terms of creation of safe space. Believes safe spaces that he contributed to create in his home-town were more appropriate and inclusive (for those that really need an inclusive space) • has political experience of the big city for various (percorsi politici). Thinks the large dimension makes it much harder to do politics, things are lined to power dynamics, hardship in dialogues between different groups, difficulties in negotiations.... the situation is more likely to stay immobile, whereas in the small town activism is more effective and contrasts are fewer, because people are always the same and you know them well personally. • Thinks gay life in the metropolis is not heterogeneous at all, as it is segmented and everybody just chooses their niche, there is no inclusive party for all. Au contraire, the inclusivity and the dimension of the provincial gay life makes it easier for younger generation to be part as well (as shown by the people at the demonstrations of Bgagainsthomophobia, who got observers in Milan very surprised)
4	• Lives in Milan. • Fashion was very important in his personal growth • has started going to gay spaces of via lecco or plastic only at a later stage • today he's much gayer in Milan, whereas tends to be chill and more heteronormative when he visits his family back home, low profile. • describes the gay community in Milan as an "idra di Lerna", highlighting different niches. • Highlights the fact that gay community in Milan is apparently composed almost entirely by people that are not originally from Milan.
5	• Lives in Milan • as soon as he moved in, started going to Plastic three nights a week, later he worked for the club too • Really likes staying out all night, meet people, talk, drink, have fun
6	• Only uses the city at day time. Avoids nightlife, especially the gay scene
7	
8	• Studies in Milan, goes there regularly • most of his social life has moved to Milan • Clubs, nightlife, events connected to drag... very into that type of scene • would like to move there
9	
10	• Milan as a progressive beacon of light in the Italian darkness • regular in Milan for social life, leisure, activism • The challenging type of environment makes him feel unease at times, but in Milan feels much safer than elsewhere and praises the fact that you can be what you want • might move in Milan
11	• Goes to Milan just for a change, to be in a different place • Hasn't experienced much of gay life, but he's young, only 18 (and hangs out with

	a sexually mixed group of friends)
12	• Has studied and lived in Milan and he's very attached to it (even though he chose to move back to the country). • It was his first gay association. • Was very energetic back then, made lots of friends and meaningful contacts. Still has some sort of network. • Not really been in gay spaces, but definitely avoids the mainstream scene of porta venezia, sammartini, Loreto. Says sexuality there is commodified and that makes him feel uncomfortable. • Still believes that, after all, the city has a lot to offer
13	• Milan for the nightlife, tendency to places where the sexual dimension is stronger (dark rooms etc.)
14	• Thinks it is a stressful, chaotic
15	• Not much relationship with Milan • Says pride was not very daring, quite boring • larger dimension makes it harder to control. Prefers smaller environments
16	• Work and leisure • lgbt spaces too, mostly clubs, bars in porta venezia • Likes it, but prefer the smaller dimension of the town he's from
17	• Around 30 started going to Milan very often exclusively for night life, multiple times a week, keeping one foot in the province (He moved to a medium town though).
18	
19	• Milan linked to the most total experiences of sexual liberation, which he remembers as something incredibly fun • "reality exceeded expectations, straight people don't know shit" • saunas, cinemas
20	• (20b): Mostly nightlife, clubs and fun • today mostly via lecco, porta venezia, nolo
21	• Mostly nightlife, clubs and fun • today mostly via lecco
22	• Initially nightlife, clubs and fun. • Gradually got disappointed by the gay community because of promiscuity and some arguments with friends. Stopped going nights out with gay friends when he got into a serious relationship • today more via lecco • The gay guy in Milan: fit jock, goes clubbing wearing a tank top, gets shirtless
23	• Frenetic, crazy. It is beautiful, but he doesn't like it that much, only lives there for studying. • Been to some LGBTQ spaces, but complains about being still single. • Like LaBoum best. (mainstream young fresh gay scene). Says everybody's

	welcome, gay or straight and you just gotta be yourself. About gays in Milan: some people more pretentious (..feminine? Ndr) some more discreet (masc? Ndr), but everybody is obsessed with being fit.
24	- Goes to Milan sometimes and he likes that, but nothing linked to his sexuality - thinks gay spaces have nothing special compared to other spaces, so he's not particularly attracted to them. - Calls non-gay spaces "normal places". - Thinks a gay person in Milan is a normal person, exactly like straight or bi guys.
25	- Been to Milan only twice. Not partying, just passing. Doesn't want to specify what for. - Says he can't go to meet new people in Milan for reasons that he doesn't share. Says maybe it is better this way, cause he's always too horny. - Doesn't go more because he doesn't feel like doing that or he lacks energy.
26	- Lives in Milan - Likes the anonymity, cold everyday interactions with people you don't get any familiar with - been regularly to the gay street back in the days, but for some authors they only sold in the local book-store. - Not a fan of gay bars and gay nights, find those obvious and suffocating - Immediately loved Plastic because it is more blurred - The beauty of endless nuanced possibilities, casual encounters, might see them again, sometimes, somewhere else...(no cellphones back in the days)
27	- Sporadically been to Milan - found the community dimension of LGBTQ spaces insufficient and unfulfilling (contrary to small town Pavia, where he is actively involved)
28	- Milan was crucial to explore sex and experience some kind of freedom - But the community dimension was disappointing. Experience of judgement and bullying within the gay community. - Not much around gay spaces, especially avoiding the area of porta venezia, again for fear of being judged. - Never been to pride there (on the contrary, liked the one of pavia) - Milan still a beacon of light from a professional point of view, but if he chose only based on people, he would probably choose another destination
29	- Nightlife, bars, clubs - The typical gay in Milan is the eccentric flamboyant one
30	No metropolitan experience
31	Attracted by the idea of safe space, particularly for reasons of self confidence
32	- Lives in Milan - Appreciate small things, absurd and unusual situations, weird metropolitan characters, daily surprises.
33	Rarely experience the metropolis, doesn't like it much
34	- Sporadic frequentation, nightlife, more bar lately (34b: got to discover the gay scene when he was in London)

35	• Regularly came to Milan for night life, to be far away from the eyes of his small town since a relatively early age • Initially led a double life, friends in the village at some point suspected something, since he was not going out with girls anymore, was more and more frequently in Milan, started going on holiday together with some people they didn't know well... • Today lives in Milan • Likes that the metropolis gathers together gay people with different origins, with different stories, but everyone is part of one community • hanging out, friends of friends, parties... says in Milan it is very easy to make new friends • the beauty of encounter, exchange
36	• Proximity to Milan gave him the opportunity to experience gay life when he was a teenager already (15-16), explored his sexuality in the most natural way • clubbing, dance • lgbt libraries • School was a very open minded environment, there were many openly gay and eccentric characters in high-school already • The City centre of Milan as a safe space (Within Circonvallazione)
37	• Lives in Milan • Clubs, bars • Says lgbt spaces are super, gradually they became like home • Thinks via lecco really conveys the feeling of community • Will stay

Table 6: The Gay Community, Involvement and Belonging

1	• Knows associations and what is going on • has been part of initiatives and got actively involved • interested in this dimension because his mother was first, immediately after he came out • was a lot into gay shit and people at an early phase, this gradually eroded, he starts missing that again now
2	• Many gay friends, especially in the medium town of his province, but some in the village crew too, albeit rare • sense of belonging in in the gay community, simply as in gay. • No “ghettoisation”, likes mixed environment where you can get a date with some among the crowd • has been actively involved in community life in terms of activism too • plans to set up some lgbt sensitisation events or service in his own village too, cooperating with local associations.

3	• If called gay he refuses the term, prefer to identify as fag • politically involved, activist for the community
4	• Appears to be 'slave' of cool and sophisticated lifestyle and interests, and therefore he's not free. He's a peculiar type of gay, that can be very gay, but very constructed at the same time. • No involvement in community activism • his way of speaking does not suggest great sympathy for the gays as a community
5	• Claims he's a proud member of the lgbt community. • Initially avoided pride parade when it was uncool, but started going before it was mainstream
6	• Avoids gay life. Believes the community is way too much centred on sex and that clashes with his (conservative and family centred) values. Sexophobic. • no relation to the gay community. Only has gay acquaintances, but no friends
7	• Feels part of the community, friends are important, but not actively engaged.
8	• Says 3/4 of the people he hangs out with are gay. • Proud member of the community and activist
9	• 18, youngest member of the pride committee in Bergamo • enthusiastic about getting engaged in activism together with the LGBTQ+ community • through internet use and school initiatives was well informed before coming into contact with associations. • Initially was scared of being alone, community building and engagement not be alone
10	• Becoming actively involved in the gay community was the most relevant experience. He could finally belong. • Strong sense of belonging
11	• Not much involved, due to his remote location. Wishes to participate more in the future • has gay friends he talks to, but not only friend with gay people, au contraire... gays are not even his best friends. • He acts very gay, but more for himself. He's more part of a virtual community than a real one.
12	• Engaged in community life. As a student in Milan was part of the gay association of the university • particularly interested in trans-feminist situations • doesn't like arcigay or association like gay statale milano, since he thinks that those are for people that want to flirt. They claim to be political and shit, but actually hide very banal purposes. • Working to create a new LGBTQ space in the valley that would be a place of true liberation and inclusivity and propose an alternative narrative to mainstream gay community. Not just another gay leisure centre, but a space for queer people with a well developed queer consciousness. • Working to create a help and information desk in the library of the village

	targeting queer people in the area. Also as a political statement
13	- Initially enthusiast of the gay group he had in the area of Bergamo - Not in good terms with the gay community anymore - says their are superficial and fake - doesn't like pride, says it's carnival.
14	No friends, no involvement
15	- Not actively involved in the community for choice. (local politics at a wider level) - supported pride organisation and practicalities from within the municipality
16	- Acquaintances and friendly interactions, but no active engagement for the community. - The political party he is part of is a homophobic one. Concerning lgbt issues, the leader prevails, n.16 follows and doesn't consider that part of the agenda either. - Does not participate to pride.
17	- Activist. - His attitude at pride reflects the need of being accepted (by the straights)
18	
19	- Don't like pride, believes in "serious" struggle - believes transvestite is a matter of under-culture
	Same. Best pride: Istanbul. The political dimension behind homo liberation
20	- They like pride. 20a: would like it to be more angry and politically radical 20b: believes it's good that it is a happy colourful gathering, helps to challenge the common perception that homos are shady dangerous creatures of the night
21	- Used to go to pride before it was cool - doesn't like it now, lack of decency, loss of political sense - well aware about what us going on also at the local level in associations - reveals bitterness towards the gay community in general, some slut shaming
22	- No involvement, no real sense of belonging - pride as a stage for being accepted and an opportunity for families to educate their kids to diversity - no sympathy for those flamboyant ones
23	
24	- Closeted and doesn't feel confident - learnt to interact with other LGBTQ people on grindr or through Instagram pages about teenage bullying and stuff. - Has had encounters with other grindr users too - thinks pride is a good and inclusive demonstration. But doesn't participate due to his closeted identity.
25	- Closeted, no involvement. - Only interacts through grindr, sexting occasionally with tourists that come to his area and are mainly looking around, but don't really look for real encounters.

	• when horny often unload with porn and masturbation to make it pass. Sexting.
26	• Not much involved until recent years, when he thought it was necessary • precise opinion on what being gay means, beyond the sexual sphere • pride is everyday
27	• Very active involvement in the community • prominent role in the local LGBTQ association • first pride in a small town ever organised
28	• Was never interested in LGBTQ associations and doesn't know much. • Unfortunately only contact through gay dating apps (refers to "our apps") and recently Instagram
29	
30	• No sense of belonging
31	• High sense of belonging • was never particularly interested in associations and community engagement. Also, that was impossible for practical reasons
32	• Ambiguous sense of belonging • doesn't like being labelled, but takes sides. Thinks it's a duty towards the others of lgbt community • queer vision, beyond the gender binary
33	• No sense of belonging emerged
34	• No sense of belonging emerged
35	• Sense of belonging emerges in particular in relation to empathy with stories of lgbt community members that struggle • Loves pride as a liberation party
36	• Proud member of the lgbtq+ community. • activist • Engaged in community activities through an lgbt library
37	• Sense of belonging emerges, but no contact with associations

Table 7: The Gay Community, Urban/Rural Divide

1	
2	• Disparity in terms of access to resources and to people. • Thinks grindr reduces movement of people, and gays in the country just accept whatever is around them, also creating a disparity in terms of standard. • Distinguishes between age groups. In the case of young people: no difference a the identity level. Older gays: hidden and closeted in the country.

3	• Says there is a different way on intending and living frociety, but remains vague about it • says that the gay community in the city is heterogeneous in terms of its provenance, whereas in the province there is a much stronger territorial dimension which is reflected in the local politics of local lgbt groups that have often different paths according the peculiarities of their experiences. Also, whereas in the city gay identity has become commodified, in the province we see the re-emergence of pride due to the thirst for redemption.
4	• Makes a distinction between those that decide to leave the country and those that decide to stay • believes that those who stay are unresolved, envious, less intelligent. • Believes that gays in rural areas are more hidden and closeted.
5	• Believes there is a huge difference • In a city like Milan the community is more unite by an ideal of lifestyle, whereas in the province, for those who are out and proud, the dimension of militancy is more relevant • In the city there is a significant variety of aesthetic codes, whereas in the province there is a different way of being community, more stringent, less permeable. The behavioural codes are much more standardised (as a result of "enclosure" and necessity of creating a safe space) • In terms of style: in the country gays use expensive brands as an armour, whereas in the city luxury and money are not flaunted like that. • Youngest generations are much more homogeneous: rejection of the idea of homosexuality as diversity
6	
7	• Divide reflected by higher and lower degrees of tolerance. Gays in the city are more evident cause they are less scared of judgement.
8	• Divide reflected by higher and lower degrees of tolerance. Gays in the city are more evident cause they are less scared of judgement.
9	• Yes, there is a difference • gays in the country are more heteronormative, whereas in the city there's more variety of characters
10	• Yes, there is a difference • Milan as radically opposed to the rest of the country: a challenging environment which requires an effort in the elaboration of the self, makes you feel inadequate. • In comparison to the province Milan accentuates certain traits to the nth degree: the case of the fitness culture. • However, in Milan there is a counter trend to that macho ideal of gay men that cannot be found elsewhere • Associates the province to the commonplace equation gay=aids. Says this can be true still nowadays. • Homosexuality in the province is not really included... it is domesticated. It exists at the conditions of the province. • In the province homosexuals that are recognised as such are the feminine ones, the masculine gay man does exist only in the urban context. In the country that's

	the discreet married man looking for random adventures.
11	• Yes there is a difference • gays in the city are more flamboyant (source: internet culture, pride parade in Milan) • gays in the country are less free to be gay, hidden, closeted (source: grindr) • doesn't really have an idea of the gay person in Milan. More embedded in an internet culture that reflects the image of the American LGBTQ community, rather than the Italian community.
12	• Yes there is a difference • in the country judgement of others and neighbours is more a burden. In the city there is a lot of people and you mind less what they see or what they think, it is more chill and anonymous. This has an influence on how people act and how they feel free.
13	• Yes there is a difference • believes that people in the province are more naive and more gullible, because they haven't (yet) experienced the malice of the urban gay community • Although the city provides opportunities, it is a fundamentally unhappy space, precisely because the excessive amount of those opportunities.
14	
15	
16	• Cities as more tolerant places where things that would be weird in small centres become more normal in people's perception.
17	• Divide reflected by higher and lower degrees of tolerance. Gays in the city are more evident cause they are less scared of judgement.
18	• No there is no difference (based on the people that come to his bar, supposedly)
19	
20	• Yes, there is a difference • greater amount of gays around brings excess (cause people feel stronger if they are surrounded by peers?), especially when it comes to femininity. However, just a matter of numbers. • believes the city is the place of stereotypical gays
	• Believes that it is more the new kind of environment linked to professional life and new habits (in terms of leisure and free time) that drive gay people to excess, especially new comers, that really get transformed.
21	• Not convinced about difference • maybe the thing is: in Milan self care and looks are a more relevant asset than elsewhere
22	• Divide reflected by higher and lower degrees of tolerance. Gays in the city are more evident cause they are less scared of judgement.
23	
24	• Gay people have more chances to find peers in the city simply because there's

	more people, whereas there's little people in the village.
25	
26	• Being gay in a city means... being truly gay. • The rural experience is merely sexual and excludes all other dimensions • believes the fit jock is a universal ideal shared by both the metropolis and the countryside... • ...but in the city there is still some space for alternative types of experience
27	• Yes, there is a difference but it is linked to the circumstances. • In places where machist patriarchal culture is dominant, the individual that doesn't conform to the the ideal of the alpha male becomes the character of the village and their fight for visibility might be even stronger, but it is based on a model and a stereotype that is was imposed on them, not reflecting the image of their true self. • In the metropolis, more variety of models, more tolerance, less stereotypical characters. • For what concerns cultural dimension vs sexual dimension: No difference between city and country. Everybody derives from a historical culture where homosexuality is perversion: people who only care about sex and are not interested in exploring other dimension of their identity exist in cities too.
28	• Thinks people in the country are more closeted and they come out more easily as bi than gay, even when they only like men. Also many are partnered with girls and then you find them on apps with no pictures only looking for sex. Signal of persisting stigma in the country. • People in the city have more visual stimuli. Easier to spot two men holding hands and this helps people that are yet to come out to be brave. Also pride and public demonstrations of visibility help a lot people getting confidence.
29	• Divide reflected by higher and lower degrees of tolerance. Gays in the city are more evident cause they are less scared of judgement. More flamboyant in the city
30	
31	• Believes the divide is true for people of a certain age mostly. Divide more generational than spatial. • Mentions pride wave • The city as the place of stereotypical gays, of all different, kinds, whereas in the country people are more homogeneous and similar to their straight counterparts.
32	• Believes that gay people in the metropolis are just gay people that come from the province and and then get transformed in the new environment • He gives to such transformation a negative connotation • Gay people in Milan are stupid, banal, centred on looks, public relations, clusters...
33	• Gay people in the city are more extrovert. Also more feminine, but that's more something his father would say maybe
34	• No substantial divide • 34b refers to gay people in the country adapting and living a double life

35	• Country for old gays closeted and repressed, city for young gays with ambitions. • Dominance in Milan of performative culture: looks and lifestyle
36	• Doesn't see a real divide specific for gay people, more a general divide
37	