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Confessional narratives in digital self- and life-writing of bisexual activists in Russia: A case study of bisexual identity building

This article focuses on digital self- and life-writing as a tool of online activism. Drawing on case studies of social media activism for bisexual rights in contemporary Russia, the article explores the ways in which the media genre of confessional narrative is employed by activists for constructing a shared bisexual identity in the process of self-mediation through social media platforms. Applying digital ethnography and interpretive content analysis methods, the paper presents a content analysis of video, textual and visual texts created by bisexual rights activists based in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Perm' and Vladivostok, and published on social media platforms (YouTube, Telegram, Facebook) in 2020 and 2021.

Bisexual rights activism in Russia after 2013

In scholarship and discussions on LGBTQ-rights activism in Russia, the notorious 2013 law which bans 'the promotion of non-traditional sexual relations among minors' has come to be viewed as a watershed in Russian discourses on sex, sexuality and gender. The discursive impact of the Russian LGBTQ-legislation is not dissimilar to that of the UK's Section 28 which was introduced by the Conservative government in 1988 as a backlash against the growing visibility and acceptance of gays and lesbians (Fish et al. 2018). In the UK, the introduction of Section 28 banning discussions about homosexuality in

schools which would portray same-sex relationships as valid, led, on the one hand, to the infringement of LGBTQ people's rights (Greenland et al. 2008), but on the other hand, to the strengthening of the LGBTQ-rights activist movement (Fish et al. 2018; Farmer 2020).

The Russian anti-LGBTQ law, in some ways replicating the UK Section 28 discourse of protecting minors from 'harmful' information, brought about not only a new wave of oppression of LGBTQ people (e.g., Persson 2015), but also a consolidation of LGBTQ-rights groups and initiatives and their allies and supporters across Russia (e.g. Buyantueva 2020). This process of strengthening and

consolidation benefited all stigmatized social groups united under the LGBTQ abbreviation, in particular bisexual¹ people, as it is after 2013 that the activist movement for bisexual rights first came into existence when the first bisexual rights initiative *LuBI* was created in St Petersburg.²

Since the introduction of the anti-LGBTQ legislation in Russia in 2013 and up to February 2022 when Russia unleashed a full-fledged war in Ukraine, there was a consistent growth, diversification, and evolution of media discourses on and around LGBTQ-related themes, particularly in what relates to mediated portrayals of non-heteronormative people (Andreevskikh 2020: 173). Parallel to that, there was a steady growth in the number of LGBTQ-rights initiatives in various regions and in the number of diverse and prolific media

channels used by LGBTQ people to promote the LGBTQ agenda. Online activism for bisexual rights was also part of these developments.

In December 2017, when I was doing the fieldwork for my previous study of online activism for bisexual and transgender rights (Andreevskikh 2018), I interviewed the leader of the bisexual rights initiative *LuBI* M., who at that time was one of a handful of publicly open bisexual Russians involved in online activism on social media platforms. Back then, M. admitted that the issues and topics related to bisexuality were not very popular in virtual communities of LGBTQ people on social media, and she also confessed that the few bisexual rights activists, including herself, frequently faced backlashes or lack of support on the part of other members of LGBTQ communities. The activist explained

¹ Among Russian activists for bisexual rights, several terms are currently used to refer to the sexual orientation which involves sexual attraction to more than one gender: bisexual (*biseksual'nyi/biseksual*); non-monosexual or non-mono (*nemonoseksual'nyi/nemono*), a term introduced by activist E. to oppose bi- and pansexual orientations to the monosexual ones, that is – homosexuality and heterosexuality; bi*sexual, the term used by the founders of the initiative *Byt' Bi** (Being Bi*), where the asterisk highlights that

this term includes the whole spectre of non-monosexual orientations. When I use the term 'bisexual' I refer to all these three terms simultaneously and use it as an umbrella term for the sexual orientation entailing an attraction to the opposite as well as other genders.

² The organization's name is based on a pun: it is a portmanteau of the imperative form of the verb 'to love' (*liubi*) and the Russian pronunciation of the morpheme 'bi' in '*biseksual'nyi*' (bisexual) – [bee].

that, although at times it was difficult to run the social media pages of the *LuBI* group practically single-handedly, she saw it as important and valuable work aimed at fighting biphobia and monosexism (exclusion and/or discrimination of people whose sexual orientation is neither heterosexual nor homosexual).

M.'s account confirmed the observations by various scholars that online activism on social media can be vital for bisexual people, a minority within a minority (Brown et al. 2017; Egan 2005; Hagen et al. 2017; Ingram et al. 2017; Serano 2013; Shapiro 2004). The minority-within-minority status of bisexual people is to some extent caused by the fact that they tend to be viewed as a threat to the binary monosexual dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality, which is one of the foundations of gay and lesbian rights movements, as well as of the conservative discourses on 'traditional values'. Bisexual people, as a result, tend to be discriminated and ostracized both by heterosexual society and by homosexual members of LGBTQ communities (Cashore et al. 2009; Garelick et al. 2017; Nutter-Pridgen 2015; Roberts et al. 2015). In the view of the above, important aspects of bisexual rights activism consist in working towards visibility as a bisexual

individual, in educating others on what it means to be bisexual, as well as in exchanging shared experiences of biphobia and bisexual erasure with other non-monosexual people. All these aspects contribute to the process of identity-building, which in the context of double stigmatisation on the part of LGBTQ communities and heterosexual majority, tends to be viewed as positive, which is demonstrated further in this paper through a media content analysis. For this reason, in the current study the bisexual identity is understood not only through the prism of Foucauldian categories of power, domination and control, and not just as a 'quest for authenticity' (Weir 2009: 537), but also, if not primarily, as a 'resistant identity' which allows 'alternative interpretations' (Weir 2009: 539) of existing binary categories of sexuality.

Social media platforms become 'the locus of coordination and action' (Kurylo et al. 2016: 134) for fighting this double stigma. The strategies and techniques used by bisexual rights activists can serve as a means of transgressing the binary monosexist concept of sexuality, as a way of utilising the activist's emotional capital (Andreevskikh 2018), as well as a method of creating and sustaining emotional communities

aimed at strengthening and solidifying the activist movement in the country (Andreevskikh forthcoming). Transgressing the hegemonic Russian LGBTQ-activist discourse of normalcy and equality that has been focusing primarily on gay men's and lesbian women's issues and rights, online activism of bisexual people aims at deconstructing the binary concept of sexuality as hetero- vs. homosexuality.

By 2022, the time when the current study was completed, the situation with the bisexual rights activism in Russia had changed dramatically from what it was in 2017. Several regional community centres had started holding regular events catered specifically for bisexual people;³ mainstream and LGBTQ-catering media outlets had started publishing more materials about bisexuality;⁴ new initiative and activist groups had been organised. For example, in 2019, an initiative for bisexual people was started in Moscow,

under the name *Being Bi** [Byt' Bi*]. Apart from holding online and offline events, as well as photo exhibitions devoted to bisexuality and bisexual people, the initiative also launched the first website in the Russian language devoted solely to bi- and pansexuality and catered for Russian-speaking bi- and pansexual people living in Russia and beyond. The media resource *BiPan-Russia*⁵ was launched on 23 September 2021, to mark the global Bisexual Visibility Day.

The new online resource is comprised of a variety of sections: 'About Us', 'News', 'Events', 'Articles published in the media', 'Education', 'Initiatives in Russia'. Of a particular interest is the interactive map of current initiatives in Russia which cater for bisexual people. The 'Articles' section contains an archive of media texts devoted to the topics connected with bi- and pansexuality. The 'Education' section consists of definitions of terms and

³ For example, the St Petersburg-based LGBTQ community centre *Action* [Deistvie], together with the activists from the bisexual rights initiative *LuBI*, has been running support groups for bisexual people since 2018. The *Resursnyi Tsentri Dlia LGBT* (LGBT Resource Centre), an Ekaterinburg-based community centre, regularly holds events for bisexual people, including a 'Non-monmonth' in September, in honour of the Bisexual Visibility Day which is

celebrated on 23 September. With the support of the Moscow-based LGBTQ initiative *Resource* [Resurs], *Being Bi** has been running support groups for bisexual people, both offline and online.

⁴ An archive of media texts on bisexuality published over the last ten years can be found on the website of the *Being Bi** initiative (Byt' Bi 2021b).

⁵ The website can be accessed here: <https://bipanrussia.com/> (Byt' Bi 2021a).

concepts related to sexual and gender identity, as well as a 'Library' subsection – lists of social media channels, books, films, and series featuring bisexual characters.

While the list of social media resources is related to Russian or Russian speaking LGBTQ activists, the article archive and the lists of books, films and series contain, perhaps not surprisingly, a high number of foreign sources, such as, for example, a translation of the bisexual manifesto published in 1990 by Bay Area Bisexual Network. Indeed, Russian activists follow closely the development of bisexual rights movements outside of Russia, and bi-activists themselves admit that they rely to a great extent on resources in English and other foreign languages.⁶ Being and feeling interconnected with the global agenda of bisexual rights activists, social media content produced by activists in Russia also tackles topics and issues widely discussed in western, Anglophone virtual community and media channels, e.g., the

problems of bisexual erasure and monosexism (Corey 2017) and the importance of bi-visibility in media (Capulet 2000, Yescavage et al. 2000). The formats in which this activist social media content is presented are also similar to those utilized by activists outside of Russia. One such format, powerful and therefore popular among activists, is the confessional narrative, which I explore more fully in the next section. Confessional narratives, when used by activists on social media platforms, serve as discursive tools for digital self-writing and life-writing. Using these two types of digital self-mediation, two axes of analysis, and the concept of confessional narrative as a framework for this study, I set and address the following research questions:

- How do Russian activists for bisexual rights use confessions in their mediated personal narratives?
- What is the role of mediated confessional narratives in the process of self-

⁶ Here I rely on the account of the bisexual rights activists F. (*Being'Bi**), B. (*Action*) and E., who during the online discussion *Awkward Questions to Bisexual People* (*Neudobnye voprosy biseksaul'nyh liudiam*), organized by *Being Bi** and livestreamed on 26 September 2021, admitted that a lot of

information and research on bisexuality they use in their activist work is done abroad and is accessed via translation. The videorecording is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_ShfmHI3f4 (BiPanRussia 2021).

identification as a bisexual person and activist?

Through addressing these research questions, I aspire to bridge the gap in the current scholarship on bisexuality, which lacks empirical analyses of media strategies applied by non-Western activists for bisexual rights. I also venture to add an extra dimension to the prolific scholarship on Russian LGBTQ communities, which rarely focuses on bisexual activists in particular.

Confessional narratives as a media case study framework

Following scholarship on narratology, I approach narratives as ‘a virtual sphere, emerging in communication, containing events that are temporally related to each other in a meaningful way’; in other words, a narrative is comprised of ‘represented events that are temporally interrelated in a meaningful way’ (Elleström 2019: 37). Thus, in this paper a narrative stands for a verbally expressed account of events, presented in an oral or written form, where the events are connected with a plotline, a common idea, or a thematic thread.

Confessional narratives are understood as such accounts of events which are aimed at revealing to the audience what the narrator has done or accomplished, as well as what the narrator feels, thinks, or believes, in particular with regard to something the narrator might be or have been ashamed of or embarrassed about, wishes to apologize for, or which, in the narrator’s opinion, might turn the audience against them.⁷

Confessions belong to discourses of self-writing (Foucault 1981), where self-writing can be viewed as a form of self-care which manifests itself in a collection of notes and observations on various topics and which, in case of confessions made on social media, are shared with a wide or narrow, trusted audience. In media discourses confessions can come in the format of verbally expressed texts, selfies, or vlogs (Hall 2016), the content of which can range from an unhappy employee’s complaint (Krishnaa et al. 2015: 404–410) to a coming-out narrative of a LGBTQ person. It is a powerful strategy of ‘me-centred communication’ that, in the context of contemporary DIY media cultures, allows individuals not only to express their

⁷ Here I combine the various meanings of the word ‘confession’ as listed in the

online Collins COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary (Collins n.d.).

intimate thoughts or experiences but also to socialize with others (Talvitie-Lamberg 2014). For that reason, social media confessions become an empowering tool of online activist campaigns conducted by discriminated social groups. One such example where confessions shared online led to dramatic social changes is the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment (e.g., Gill et al. 2018; Pelegrini 2018).

Although such narratives have become particularly popular recently, confessional media posts by celebrities and common social media users being one of the sources of new stories for media coverage, confessions as such are far from being a new cultural phenomenon (Friesen 2017; Gammel 1999): confessions are at the heart of various literary genres, from autobiographies to *Bildungsroman* (Barcan 1997). What unites all confession-based genres, both traditional literary and newer mediated textual genres, is the interconnection between the confessional mode of narration and the identity of the person who is performing a confession: 'Confessions, as moments of textualization, foreground the performativity of identity and are therefore highly charged events. They are resounding moments, since they activate identity in both its fluid and congealing

aspects simultaneously' (Barcan 1997: 84).

For the purpose of the current case study, not everything shared by activists on social media is approached as a 'confession'. Here I follow Foucault who identified an important (and also popular on social media) type of self-writing narrative – the self-writing genre which Foucault defined as *hupomnēmata* – notes which serve as 'memory aids':

One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind. They constituted a material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation. They also formed a raw material for the drafting of more systematic treatises, in which one presented arguments and means for struggling against some weakness (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or for overcoming some difficult circumstance (a grief, an exile, ruin, disgrace) (Foucault 1981: 209–210).

Foucault underlined that, although such notes do convey personal opinions, thoughts, and impressions, discursively they are not to be confused with the intimate accounts of spiritual experiences which constitute the nature of confession, as they do not possess a purificatory value inherent to an oral or written confession (Foucault 1981: 210).

Throughout the existence of confessional genres, their popularity among marginalized social groups of any minoritarian characteristic (from gender to age to race to sexuality) has been growing steadily despite the risks of repercussions or backlashes that could potentially follow the confession (Grobe 2017: 38–40). The backlash can potentially be particularly strong when a non-heterosexual person makes a confession related to their non-heteronormative sexuality in the context of a conservative anti-LGBTQ climate. ‘Unlike other interdictions, sexual interdictions are constantly connected with the obligation to tell the truth about oneself’ (Foucault 1981: 223); therefore, the choice of the confessional narrative framework for a media case study of bisexual rights activism in the context of Russia’s state-sustained anti-LGBTQ discourses seems topical and relevant.

In contemporary LGBTQ discourses, for a LGBTQ person an ‘obligation to tell the truth about oneself’ can come from the external pressure (outing) or from the internal desire to be open about their non-heteronormative sexuality to a trusted audience in benevolent circumstances (Kislitsyna 2021), with mediated coming-out narratives on YouTube and other social media platforms being an important part of LGBTQ-rights activism in Russia (see, for example, Glenn 2021). In the new, evolving reality where self-mediation has become an integral part of the mediatized lives of individuals acting as mediated selves (Ratilainen et al. 2018; Talvitie-Lamberg 2014), coming-out narratives and other subgenres of confessional narratives can be viewed as manifestations of what Foucault defined as ‘technologies of the self, which permit individuals [...] a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality’ (Foucault 1981: 225). Thus, the process of digital self-writing becomes interwoven with the process of building a non-heteronormative (e.g., a bisexual) sexual identity, where self-mediated

digital selves act as bodyminds, which means that 'one's self is never separate from one's body or from one's mind', where 'one's mind and body always already are one' (Hartblay et al 2021: 5). Apart from the task of self-writing, confessional narratives can also be used as a material for digital life-writing, the latter understood as a 'range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed' (Leader 2015: 1). Often traced to one of the world's most prominent bisexual authors, Virginia Woolf, who in her creative work revolutionized the genre of literary biography, in the context of social media platforms the term 'life-writing' can be applied to various digital forms of texts: blogs, tweets, and Facebook entries (Leader 2015: 1). The media data which the current study is based on tackles a variety of topics related to different spheres of activists' lives: their involvement in bisexual rights and civil rights activism; their participation in protest actions; their experiences of interacting with the police; their personal histories of coming to terms with their sexual identity; the support or lack thereof on the part of their families, friends and other significant social circles; the struggles and challenges related specifically to

the consequence of the double stigmatisation of bisexual people among LGBTQ communities and by heterosexual people; their experiences of navigating media spaces as mediated digital selves, etc. With regard to the interpretive data analysis of confessional narratives which comprises the current case study, the thematic diversity of the content calls for the perspective of digital life-writing, in addition to that of self-writing.

Applying digital ethnography and interpretive content analysis methods, I further present an analysis of media content created by bisexual rights activists based in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Perm' and Vladivostok, and published on social media platforms (YouTube, Telegram, Facebook) in 2020 and 2021. The selection of the media cases for analysis was based on the results of monitoring Russian social media accounts and virtual communities for bisexual people from 2017 to 2020, which allowed me to identify the most prominent personae in Russian bi-rights activism and to establish which social media channels or personal blogs produce media content popular among bisexual people in Russia.

The process of media data collection consisted of two stages. In the first stage, through the

‘digitally native’ (Georgakopoulou 2016: 303) ethnographic methods, such as observing various activities conducted on social media platforms by activists who openly identify as bisexual, I defined the key personae in the current bisexual rights movement in Russia. After that, based on the media representations of the selected activists and their self-mediation practices, I selected the media texts (YouTube videos) and social media sources (a Facebook blog and a Telegram channel) for subsequent interpretive content analysis. Identifying myself as a bisexual rights activist too, this process also entailed to a certain extent the use of the method of ‘auto-phenomenology’ as ‘the researcher’s reflexivity about her own position, stakes, and interests in the field of social media engagement’ (Georgakopoulou 2016: 303). In the next section I present the results of the content analysis of YouTube videos and Facebook and Telegram posts featuring confessional narratives of bisexual rights activists.

Awkward questions and personal stories: Confessional narratives as a means of real-

⁸ After Russia’s invasion in Ukraine and a new crackdown on activists, the access

life interactions with audiences

Both in the capacity of a media scholar specialising on LGBTQ discourses and as a bisexual rights activist, I consistently follow developments in Russian LGBTQ-rights activism, paying special attention to the latest media content and new media sources related to bisexuality. Throughout the year of 2021, while monitoring Russian social media communities for bisexual people, I identified two online media texts of a significant value in terms of promoting bisexual rights agenda through a confessional narrative framework.

Both these texts are YouTube video recordings of livestreamed conversations between bisexual activists and audiences. The first video is a recording of an online livestreamed discussion *Awkward Questions for Bisexual People* (*Neudobnye voprosy bisexual'nym liudiam*), which was held by the Saint Petersburg LGBTQ community centre *Action* [Deistvie] and which was livestreamed on 26 March 2021 (Deistvie 2021).⁸ The second video is a recording of a panel discussion *BI-Talk: Power Within Community* (*BI-talk: sila vnutri*

to the video with the recording of the talk was changed from public to private.

soobshchestva) which was live-streamed on 29 September 2021 as part of the programme of the annual festival of queer and LGBT culture *Queerfest*.⁹¹⁰

The 104-minute online discussion *Awkward Questions for Bisexual People* (Action 2021) featured three speakers seated in front of the camera, with the facilitator of the talk being off-screen. One of the participants, B., Director for Development at the St Petersburg LGBTQ community centre *Deistvie* and a bisexual rights activist in her own right, acted as the facilitator. The three discussants introduced themselves as: C., a 38-year-old cisgender woman, as of 2015 participating in activism for LGBTQ rights, bisexual rights, and protection of rights of HIV-positive people; D., a 36-year-old transgender woman; A., a 20-year-old bisexual man.

The talk was built around the questions and comments that were being sent during the livestream by the online audience. The format of the talk aimed at addressing questions and issues which might be

difficult for some or most bisexual people to deal with, but which need addressing as these questions and issues are related to stereotypes and beliefs which give ground to biphobic rhetoric and attitudes.

The personal, intimate, and 'awkward' questions that the audience addressed to bisexual people reflected many of existing biphobic stereotypes and included the following points:¹¹

- 1) What do the discussants understand by the terms bisexuality and pansexuality? What is the difference?
- 2) There is a widespread opinion that bisexuality means sexual permissiveness (*seksual'naia raspushchennost'*). How many men and women have the discussants had relations with?
- 3) Have the discussants ever experienced internalized biphobia and, if so, how did they deal with it? Have they ever had any doubts regarding their sexual orientation?

⁹ The information about the festival is available on its official website (*Queerfest 2022*).

¹⁰ After Russia's invasion in Ukraine and a new crackdown on activists, the access to the video with the recording of the talk was changed from public to private.

¹¹ The wording of the questions listed further is not a word-for-word translation, but my summary of how the facilitator presented the questions, with the name or identity of the enquirer omitted.

- 4) How feasible is it, in the discussants' opinion, for a bisexual person to have a relationship with a man and a woman at the same time?
- 5) What are the discussants' views on the fact that the letter B is the least visible amongst LGBTQ communities?
- 6) What would the discussants recommend to someone who realised they are bisexual at a later stage in life?
- 7) Have the discussants ever wondered that identifying as a bisexual person might be nothing more than following fashion? Have they ever felt that, given that the oppression of LGBTQ people is so severe at present, they might be considered 'collaborators' when they are in a relationship with a person of the opposite gender?
- 8) Do the discussants think that bisexual people were born to have threesomes? What kind of threesomes have they had?
- 9) In the discussants' opinion, to what extent are bisexual people subjected to minority stress?
- 10) Do the discussants have a crush on a celebrity? If so, who?

The discussants addressed all the questions they were asked, sometimes sharing very intimate information, or sharing views which might not resonate with the rest of the community. Thus, when answering the question about internal biphobia and doubts about the sexual identity, C. confessed that it was at the age of 18 that she first started realising she might be bisexual and that she had identified as a lesbian prior to that. She explained that her reaction to that revelation was mixed, complex: at that time, the representations of bisexual women she could see in the media and public discourses were predominantly oversexualized, eroticized portrayals of 'hot women'. On the one hand, C., in her own words, was striving to break away from her family's strict rules concerning sex, she was striving for 'a riot'; but on the other hand, she did not like those oversexualized portrayals of promiscuous and 'loose' women, precisely due to C.'s own complex attitude to sex and sexuality. Having joined the LGBTQ rights movement at a more mature age, C. faced biphobia for the first time. A., in his turn, confessed that it was the state of things

within the Russian LGBTQ communities that was the cause of his internal queerphobia: in the 2010s, when at the age of 12 he realized he experienced a sexual attraction to men, the stigmatisation of bisexual men was particularly strong among Russian gay men, which resulted in him not wanting to be part of that biphobic community.

When the discussants were dealing with the question whether they had had an experience of threesomes, L. admitted that her first experience of same-sex relationship was in a threesome; A. confessed that he had threesomes more than once, with two female friends of his; and D. explained that she had had the experience but found it problematic.

The participants of the 91-minute discussion *BI-Talk: Power Within Community* (Queerfest. 2021) demonstrated a similar level of openness and similar strategies of using confessions; the themes and issues they discussed also echoed those which were raised in the online talk presented above. The panel talk featured six bisexual rights activists who represent the first Russian association of activists for the rights of non-monosexual people *Non-Monolith* [Nemonolit]: B. (Saint Petersburg, woman, originally from Briansk), E. (Saint

Petersburg, non-binary person, originally from Tiumen'), F. (Moscow, woman), G. (Saint Petersburg, woman), H. (Ekaterinburg, woman), I. (Perm', woman). In the first part of the talk, each participant presented an approximately five-minute speech, and a Q&A session followed in the second part of the event.

From the very first presentation, the talk was framed as a confessional and highly personal narrative. Thus, H., who was the first to tell her story, started with sharing her memories of when she fell in love with a girl who they were in the same class with: that love was unrequited, and looking back, the activist 'feels very sorry for' that young self. Another confession H. made was that she still feels invisible in the LGBTQ community, regardless of her having been involved in activism for many years. She also admitted due to bisexuality being not very visible in the community she feels like 'an impostor' and regrets that 'while for some the moment of finding their identity was beautiful', for her the pain didn't stop when she started identifying as a bisexual woman.

B. shared a similar story of unrequited love: the activist confessed that, growing up, she used to believe that heterosexuality

was the only valid sexual orientation, until at the age of 19 when she fell in love with her female friend. Having been planning to follow the socially accepted route of finding a husband and starting a family, it took B., in her own words, over a year to come to terms with the realisation that she was not heterosexual, but bisexual. E. also shared the experience of having to come to terms with their orientation: having kissed a girl for the first time at the age of ten, they felt ashamed of themselves, and when they first fell in love with a woman at the age of 21, already identifying as bisexual, they were taken aback by the reaction of the people around them who seemed to find it incomprehensible and impossible that someone can have feelings for both men and women. Activist and founder of the initiative *Being' Bi*, F., continued this narrative line and confessed to the audience that she had been a victim of abuse due to her bisexuality: her former partner, a lesbian woman, could not accept her identity and abused her emotionally and mentally, which led to the activist starting to doubt her mental health and 'normalcy'. I.'s personal story mirrored the 'impostor' feelings described by H.: I. confessed that, as a bisexual woman in a monogamous relationship with a man,

she often feels she has no place among LGBTQ-rights activists, and that it was through research into biphobia and biphobic stereotypes that she could see the barriers which hindered her embracing her sexuality.

All the nine speakers featuring in these video recordings demonstrated openness when tackling complicated and even taboo topics (e.g., abuse, non-monogamous sexual practices, shame, and internalized biphobia). Besides that, they also demonstrated a willingness to use confessions for explaining their views on bisexuality and for providing an account of their journey towards an acceptance of own bisexuality. In an open discussion setting, such confessional narratives serve to connect, to bring together the individual stories of the speakers.

All the speakers underlined what a significant role the community of like-minded bisexual activists played in the processes of their self-identification and self-acceptance. They recommended those members of the audiences who are still trying to establish what their sexual identity might be and who are wondering if they might be bisexual, to talk to other bisexual people, to attend online or offline support groups or to join the local initiative for bisexual people. In other words,

through the sincerity and openness offered by confessional narratives, through sharing first-hand experiences of embracing the bisexual self and living a life of a self-accepting bisexual person, the speakers encouraged their audiences to trust them, inspiring their audiences to follow their examples and join the wider community of bisexual people.

The strategies observed in the above analysis of the oral and subsequently videorecorded confessions correlate with the findings obtained when conducting an interpretive content analysis of social media blogs of two prominent bisexual activists. The accounts were selected based on the representations and references in LGBTQ media¹² and on the individuals' active participation in bisexual rights activism. For this media sampling stage, I

selected two social media channels:

- the personal Facebook blog by Saint Petersburg based male activist J., one of the longest-serving activists for bisexual rights (J.n.d.);

- the Telegram channel *LGBTitd (LGBTetc.)* by K., an agender bisexual person, based in Vladivostok (K. n.d.).¹³

The Telegram channel *LGBTitd* is often mentioned in the recommendations of the best Russian social media resources on bisexuality.¹⁴ So is J.'s Telegram channel *Bisexual Thursday [Biseksual'nyi Chetverg; https://t.me/bisex4]*. J.'s personal Facebook blog, however, contains a higher number of posts (it shows the republished content from the Telegram channel and in addition it contains public posts written and shared by J.

¹² The activists, whose social media blogs were selected, are frequently quoted by Russian LGBTQ media with regard to the issues of biphobia, bi-activism and other topics relevant to the Russian bi-community. See, for example, the reference to J. and K. in the publication by Russia's largest LGBTQ media outlet *Parni PLUS: All You Need to Know About Biphobia [Vse, chto nuzhno znat' o bifobii]* (Parni+ 2021).

¹³ Following Russia's invading Ukraine on 24 February 2022, K. faced police persecution, was included into the list of foreign agents and therefore had to flee Russia, shutting down her (K. uses

pronouns she/her) channel on Telegram; she opened a private Telegram channel instead where access was granted by invitation only, and started publishing content on Twitter. J. continued publishing content on Facebook, including publicly accessible posts, openly speaking out against the invasion.

¹⁴ For example, activist B. recommended it to the audience of the online discussion *Awkward Questions to Bisexual People* (Neudobnye voprosy biseksual'nym liudiam), organized by *Being Bi** and livestreamed on 26 September 2021 (BiPanRussia 2021).

only on Facebook), as well as a higher number of potential audience (with 4500 friends on Facebook versus 231 subscribers on Telegram), which served as the grounds for selecting J.'s personal blog rather than his Telegram channel devoted to bisexuality. Aiming to conduct a time-based analysis of social media content (Anderson 2012: 330-331), I chose the period from March 2020 (the introduction of the first pandemic-related safety measures in Russia which led to an increase in online media usage and reliance) to the end of December 2021.

The content analysis entailed going through all the posting made by J. and K. between 1 March 2020 and 31 December 2021 in order to elicit posts which contained a narrative that could potentially be interpreted as confessional. The sampled media data was then further subjected to a close reading, which resulted in identifying confessional posts. These posts were then coded (Saldaña 2021) and grouped into thematic sections. The themes for coding were derived from the themes dominating the two online discussions presented earlier:

- Theme 1, 'Sex and love', entails everything related to sexual, intimate, and romantic relationships.
- Theme 2, 'Bodymind', includes everything related to the activists' perception of their body and mind, i.e., their physical and spiritual development, complexes and anxieties, emotions and sensations, feelings and reactions to the events unfolding around them.
- Theme 3, 'Activism', includes posts devoted to various aspects of activism, i.e., personal risks, relationships among activists, aims and objectives for the future, etc.
- Theme 4, 'Identity', relates to the activists' perceptions of themselves as bisexual people and the feelings and experiences connected with those perceptions.
- Theme 5, 'Community and society', includes everything related to the activists' links with family, friends, fellow activists, e.g., the support they receive from others or the conflicts they have faced due to their identifying as bisexual or being involved in activism.

The analysis of J.'s personal Facebook blog (J. n.d.) demonstrated, that within the selected period the highest number of

confessional posts he published were devoted to Theme 2, 'Bodymind' (44 posts). The second most frequent topic was theme 5, 'Community and society' (11 posts). Between March 2020 and December 2021, J. published seven posts related to 'Activism', five on 'Sex and love', and four on 'Identity'.

The reason why the confessional narratives in J.'s posting predominantly relate to the perceptions of body and mind can be found in the 3 December 2020 post which explains J.'s priorities:¹⁵

Why did I just put activism on hold now? Apart from prioritizing my own recovery, I have come to realize that our external activity is a continuation of internal processes. Until you put the space around in order, until you fill it with minimal comfort and order, until you have learned to think strategically, to plan, to focus on what is most important, until then it is hardly possible to achieve systemic changes (J. n.d.).

These thoughts are continued in a post of 31 December 2020 that reflects on the year gone by and

makes resolutions for the new year:

...This year has been hard, but important for me. Not the most fruitful in terms of the volume of activist activity, but it gave me a chance to take a breather, to focus on other aspects of life, gain new experiences and skills, and listen to myself more carefully. What do I want, what do I like, what do I believe in? What do I want to let go, get rid of, remove from my life? Most crucially, I've come to realize that unless I first meet my internal needs, my external activity cannot be effective in the long term. Therefore, now I am building this inner foundation as best I can (J. n.d.).

The dominating 'bodymind' thematic lines in J.'s writing frequently convey his moods, emotions, and feelings. These are presented in a way that transgresses discourses of stereotypical heteronormative toxic 'boys don't cry' masculinity. Thus, in a 27 December 2020 post he confesses that he 'over the last few days has been in a particularly pleasant

¹⁵ The translation of this and further quotes is mine.

mood. [...] Even feel like crying overwhelmed with emotions, or laughing, as if life has become deeper and gained new meanings' (J n.d.).

Quite a few posts in this thematic series present an account of achievements and successes in personal growth and skills development, tackling at the same time such sensitive topics as the author's financial struggles, religious beliefs, and the challenges of dealing with the mental health issues in the immediate family. A recurrent motif in such posts is looking back to see what has been done and what is yet to be achieved ('Lately I've been wondering which qualities I managed to develop during the first part of my life and which still need working on'; 26 April 2020) (J. n.d.). The acceptance of his own bisexual identity plays an important role in such re-evaluation: 'In many respects, the positive changes are connected with coming to terms with my bisexuality and with the experience I gained due to activism – when more often than not you go against the mainstream and the old-fashioned opinions. In this sense, this life situation has paid back in abundance. "And if I could choose myself – I would have become me again"' (26 April 2020) (J. n.d.).

The themes related to 'Bodymind' and 'Society and Community' also dominate among the posts retrieved from the Telegram channel of K. (nine posts each) (K. n.d.). Seven of the retrieved posts relate to the theme 'Sex and love', six to the thematic line 'Identity', and two to 'Activism'. One of the most important topics presented under the 'Bodymind' umbrella is K.'s perceptions of her body as a nonbinary agender person. For example, in the post of 2 March 2020 she dwells on how her perceptions of her bodily hair (e.g., hairs on the forearms and nipples) have evolved thanks to being informed that it is normal not only for a male person, but for a female person, too, to have bodily hair. Another recurrent motive here is K.'s perceptions of her emotional reactions: the feeling of shame when her partner spotted a tampon in the bathroom and made a joke about her being on period, which used to be a taboo topic for her for a long time (23 June 2020) or the constant fear of being under surveillance, the police kidnapping her or coming to her home with a search warrant, on the grounds of her involvement in oppositional and LGBTQ-rights activism (6 December 2021). When writing about relationships with 'Society and community' (e.g.,

the realisation that in fact she loves her family, regardless of disagreements and issues in the past; or the 12 August 2020 reflections on participating in a debate where she had been effectively ignored and not given a chance to speak out), K. often confesses how she feels about such complex philosophical issues as death or why it is difficult for her to work as part of the team.

To sum up, the confessional posts published by J. and K. demonstrate that this format is used as a tool for both the self-writing and life-writing processes, providing an account of events happening in the activists' lives and the impact of those events, as well as an account of the activists' consistent working towards a deeper understanding and a greater acceptance of themselves.

Conclusion

The analysis of the confessional narratives produced by Russian bisexual activists on social media platforms (YouTube, Telegram and Facebook) demonstrates that this narrative genre is utilized to achieve various goals. Firstly, it allows the activists to address and challenge the biphobic stereotypes which exist both among LGBTQ as well as among heterosexual communities, e.g.

the promiscuity of bisexual people. Different types of confessional narratives, e.g. the formats of the 'awkward questions' interview or of the personal blog, allow bisexual rights activists to share their personal stories with their audiences, thus educating audiences on bisexuality, as well as formulating what it means for them to be bisexual. When shared in a group environment or when audience participation is involved, confessional narratives take the form of a conversation, a dialogue, where a sense of shared experiences can potentially be created. Confessional narratives can also be used to frame activists' views on a whole variety of topics ranging from sex, love, sexuality to perception of own body and mind, to thoughts on challenges of being involved in activism, to community and society.

The above allows to conclude that one of the primary roles, if not the primary role of mediated confessional narratives in the process of self-identification as a bisexual person and activist is that of identity-building. Such narratives are employed as a strategy of establishing closer ties within the activist community and with the media audiences accessing the content. They are used as an effective means of approaching and

dealing with sensitive and tabooed topics, in particular issues related to sexual experiences and own self-identification. It is therefore applied as a tool for empowerment and a way of making bisexual people more visible among Russian LGBTQ communities.

The findings presented in the paper reveal the significance of oral and written confessional records for the processes of bisexual activists' digital self-writing and life-writing. Reflecting on the

various stages and aspects of coming to terms with one's bisexuality and providing an account of one's own life as an openly bisexual and self-accepting person are crucial for bisexual activists' self-identification.

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