The use of Facebook by Georgian Queer Activists: Compromised Empowerment and New Challenges

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Abstract

In Georgia, a country with a post-soviet past and a long path of geopolitical struggles that is transitioning into a liberal democracy, queer people remain as one of the most oppressed groups of the society. Despite the hostile environment, there are several openly queer activists who fight against the oppression on a daily basis. One of the battlegrounds for those fights has become Facebook, the social networking site that created another space for informational exchange and meaning construction during the interaction. The purpose of this research is to explore the use of Facebook by Georgian queer activists for their individual and community empowerment. The study deals with the concept of empowerment as the primary theoretical framework from the perspective of community phycology. With the help of a one-month netnographic observation of 10 queer activists on Facebook and interviews conducted with them, the study demonstrates the sense of empowerment that queer activists obtain through their use of Facebook. According to the activists’ accounts, Facebook increased possibilities for them to receive more information more easily and quickly, to express their opinions, negotiate their identities, engage in acts of resistance, organize the community and mobilize community members and their supporters. However, the use of Facebook is not a singlehanded process, as it has created new challenges that activists have to deal with, along with the fellow community members. Some of those challenges include increased cyberbullying, “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2011), issues of digital security and better-organized hate groups. The research adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the self-perceptions of the queer activists’ experiences, and it creates a basis for further research about studying the actual effects of Facebook on queer resistance in Georgia.

Keywords: Empowerment, ICTs, Queer, Activism, Community Psychology, Facebook.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1. The Research Topic

In the early 2000s, before the social networking site Facebook would become a popular means of online interaction in Georgia, there was a running joke on Tbilisis Forumi (the largest Georgian general-purpose internet forum) that people log in as homophobes on the forum and log out as liberals (How Tbilisis Forumi was being created, 2011). This joke epitomized the general perception of many internet users for that time that social networking sites have the power to transform peoples’ values and contribute to the democratic cohabitation of oppositional groups of the society.

Later, Facebook, “the largest social network site in the United States and in Europe” has become the prevalent channel of online communication in Georgia and this joke travelled from Tbilisis Forumi to Facebook (Van Dijck, 2013, p.45; CRRC, 2015). Generally speaking, the Internet and social media have long become ubiquitous and integral parts of social life (van de Donk et al., 2005; Midyette, Youngkin and Snow-Croft, 2014). They have affected the way individuals and social groups relate to each other and the outer world to construct meanings in the daily life (D'Errico, Poggi and Corriero, 2015).

Along with the social interactions, receiving of news and current information and entertainment, Facebook has become a space for civic engagement for Georgian social and political activists, politicians and other ardent users of social networks, including queer people (Kakachia, Pataaraia and Cecire, 2014; Tsuladze, 2014). Despite the hostile attitude of the general population towards queer individuals, currently, several Georgian Facebook users are open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are trying to challenge existing homophobic attitudes and social norms, to increase the visibility of the group or to raise the awareness about queer issues (Facebook, 2018).

Due to its ubiquity, instead of studying the social media as such, scholars recommend studying certain phenomena on its terrain (Wang et al., 2016). Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to examine Georgian queer activists on Facebook, to see how they use this particular social networking site in order to empower themselves and benefit the whole community, what their
self-perception of using Facebook for their empowerment is and what kind of challenges they face as a result of using Facebook in their activist work. Subsequently, the research will answer the main question of the study as follows:

**RQ: In what ways do Georgian queer activists get empowered through their use of Facebook?**

Answering the main research question, on the one hand, will shed light on the interrelation between the certain social networking site (SNS), *Facebook* and the specific oppressed societal group, *queer community*. On another hand, it will contribute the exploration of the opportunities and the limits of the mentioned SNS in terms of empowering the peculiar part of the queer community, namely, queer social activists in Georgia. Here, the geographical indicator has importance as well, as the scarcity of academic literature about the queer movement in Georgia was another motivation for conducting this study. Thus, this thesis will try to extend the theoretical knowledge about the oppression queer people face on a daily basis in Georgia and the path they are taking to overcome underprivileged power position. Most importantly, this study will try to fill the epistemological gap when it comes to the interrelation between the notion of empowerment and the social media, specifically, *Facebook*.

For that reason, first, the thesis will briefly review the situation of queer people in Georgia, internet and social media profile of the country and the existing literature on the field of social movements, vulnerable groups of society and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in the next sub-chapters.

The following chapter will scrutinize the theory of empowerment from the community psychological understanding. Based on this scrutiny, the subsequent sections will study the role of Facebook in the process of empowering queer activists in Georgia.

Here, the formulation of the main research question might create an impression that the study adopts optimistic view regarding the role of Facebook in queer activist’s empowerment. To avoid the overly optimistic view of the described processes three sub-questions will be offered in the later part of the thesis to emphasize the critical character of the conducted study. The sub-questions of the study will be elaborated after discussing the methodology of the research, sampling process, ethical implications, research limitations and the methods of data analysis.
After reviewing the existing academic literature, constructing the theoretical framework and scrutinizing methodology-related details, the results of the study will be presented in three sub-sections, according to the sub-questions of the research. In the final part, the thesis will answer the main research question as the study results are concluded.

As mentioned above the next sub-chapters will deliver the background information to contextualize the queer persons’ situation in Georgia, discuss the country’s social media and internet profile and review the academic literature of the relevant fields.

1.2. Background

1.2.1. Queer people in Georgia

In Georgia - a country with the Soviet past, geopolitical hardships, strong religious institutions and a transitional democratic regime – queer people remain as one of the most marginalized groups of the society (Ladaria 2012; Zollinger and Bochsler, 2012; Mestvirishvili et al., 2016). According to the Caucasus Research Resource Center’s (CRRC) 2017 survey, “homosexuals” were the most undesirable persons as neighbors, after criminals (CRRC, 2017). Another survey conducted in 2011 by the same organization showed that 88% of 2 287 respondents believed that homosexuality could never be justified (CRRC, 2011).

Same-sex activity between consenting adults was prohibited by the Soviet law in Georgia until 2000 when the newly independent country decriminalized sexual acts between same-sex persons in order to fulfill the requirements of the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights (Ottosson, 2010). The turning point for queer people in Georgia, according to Anna Rekhviashvili (2017) was the year 2006, when the first Georgian LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) community organization was established. As Rekhviashvili notes, “over the course of six years (2010–16), LGBTQ activists in Georgia have celebrated great victories and mourned terrible losses” (Rekhviashvili, 2017, p.206). Despite some institutional and nongovernmental initiatives to raise awareness about liberal values and human rights in the country, the rights of queer people remain as one of the most contested topics concerning societal acceptance (Mestvirishvili et al., 2016). The obvious articulation of the societal rejection and disapproval was May 17, 2013, when thousands of counter-demonstrators,
orchestrated by the Georgian Orthodox church, attacked approximately 50 queer activists and supporters of the group during a peaceful demonstration to protest Homophobia and Transphobia (Rekhviashvili, 2017).

According to the ILGA-Europe’s 2017 ratings of 49 European countries in terms of LGBTQ rights, Georgia holds the 33rd position and has a better place than some of EU member states, like Lithuania, Poland or Bulgaria (Rainbow-europe.org, 2018). Nevertheless, as the annual report of the Public Defender of Georgia notes, violence towards LGBTQ persons remains significant in families, as well as in public spaces and the state does not take enough measures to address the challenges in this direction (Ombudsman of Georgia, 2017). Current media reports show that the situation of transgender women is especially worrisome, as they regularly become victims of brutal physical attacks (JAMnews, 2018; OC Media, 2018).

Beyond the cultural and humanitarian motives and the consequences of the existing homo/transphobia in Georgia, geopolitical side of the story should not be ignored, as it was contemplated by Rekhviashvili (2017). Maisuradze believes that the backlash that occurred on May 17, 2013, was a clear articulation of the social injustice and dissatisfaction aggregated in the society after the defeat of Georgia in the war with Russia in 2008 and the forced neoliberal modernization of the country by the pro-western government after the 2003 “Rose Revolution” (Maisuradze, 2018). Social discontent, mentioned here was used successfully by the Georgian Orthodox Church to increase its influence over the general population and by the ethno-nationalist groups nurtured by the Russian anti-western ideology (ibid).

1.2.2. Internet and social media usage in Georgia

Internet accessibility, as well as social media usage, has risen firmly in recent years in Georgia (Turashvili, 2015; Tsuladze, 2014). For 2014, the level of internet accessibility had peaked to 48.9 percent and, despite specific logistical challenges, the pace of internetization remains stable (Turashvili, 2015). According to CRRC, there is only 1% of Georgians who have never heard about the Internet and 35% of the surveyed use internet on a daily basis (CRRC, 2015). Among regular users, the most popular online activity was using social networks and 79% of the regular internet users mentioned Facebook as a social network used at least once in a week (ibid).
Several studies have shown the growing importance of social networks for educational and marketing purposes (Gersamia and Toradze, 2017; Todua and Jashi, 2015). Most importantly, some experts believe that social networks, precisely Facebook, have an increasing impact on the political domain in Georgia (Tsuladze, 2014). Despite the low number of users who use Facebook for civic activities (men - 1.1% and women - 1.9%), almost half of the surveyed hold a positive attitude towards using this social network for civic engagement (ibid). According to Tsuladze, despite the short history, social media in Georgia plays a certain role in terms of shaping the political or social values, including civic culture (2014).

Usage of the internet and social media for civic activities in Georgia was demonstrated in several Facebook “outbreaks” including in 2013, after the violent events of May 17, when thousands of people signed the petition to support the queer persons (Tsuladze, 2014). Beyond particular circumstances, queer persons and organizations working for queer rights use their social media accounts and pages intensively to create content, raise awareness about queer issues and find new supporters. Before constructing the theoretical framework for the study and discussing the methodological details, it is needed to see how the other researchers have examined the role of ICTs in development of social movements and the lives of socially vulnerable groups.

1.3. Literature Review

1.3.1 ICTs and Social Movements

Generally speaking, the purpose of this study is to take a closer look at how the activist members of a certain social group get empowered through their use of a particular social networking site. Subsequently, the study will be situated at the intersection of the new/digital media studies (as it is related to the usage of social media), social movement studies (as it refers to queer movement in Georgia), and community psychology (as the study will rely on psychological understanding of the concept of empowerment, rather than in the sense of political, economic, developmental or any other bordering discipline). Studying the empowerment of queer activists in the context of Facebook requires problematization of the effects of certain Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) facilities on a group of people who, one the one hand, ascribe themselves to
a particular social movement, but on another side, remain in a socially underprivileged position and need to overcome marginalization. Accordingly, this section will first present existing literature about the relation between ICTs and social movements and will then scrutinize the potential of the internet in the process of empowering socially underprivileged groups.

Andrew White believes that “digital media has always been associated with social change” and sees the roots of the current interconnectedness of social movements and digital media even in the ideology of the 1960s Californian countercultural movement in the US (2014, p.125). The internet potential for social movements has become a topic of scientific scrutiny even before the coining of the term “web 2.0” by Tom O’Reilly (Downing et al., 2001; Fuchs, 2014). Some of the scholars hold an optimistic view of the relationship between social movements and social media. For example, Castells (2015) talks about the networked social movements that, according to him, were first noted during the Arab Spring and that is characterized by spreading with the help of the Internet and viral dissemination of images and ideas. One of the scholars who celebrated the appearance of the Internet on the terrain of social movements is Clay Shirky. He claimed that “as more people adopt simple social tools, and as those tools allow increasingly rapid communication, the speed of group actions also increases” (Shirky, 2008, p.161, cited in Gerbaudo, 2012, p.7). On the other side of Shirky’s techno-optimism is Belarusian scholar Morozov (2011) who criticizes the idea that dissemination of communicative technologies will bring democratic change and oppressed people will become empowered and mobilized by themselves with the help of social media or other technological means (Gerbaudo, 2012). In response to techno-optimistic and techno-pessimistic approaches from the perspective of critical theory, Fuchs claims that none of the abovementioned approaches is an appropriate method of analysis for social media (2014). Instead, he offers to shift the focus from techno-centrism towards “the power structures of the political economy of capitalism with social media” (ibid, p.256).

While the abovementioned authors problematize the role of ICTs, including social media, on social movements, Cammaerts identifies the core logic of how protest movements and activists use social media:

“ICT-supported communicative practices [are used] to
• Organize internally, recruit and network,
• Mobilize for and coordinate direct action,
• Disseminate movement frames independently of the mainstream, and
• Discuss/debate/deliberate/decide.

ICT-based communicative practices [are used] to

• Attack ideological enemies,
• Surveil the surveillers, and,
• Preserve protest artifacts.”

(Cammaerts, 2015, p.5).

Cammaerts also notes that seeing only opportunities in social media is a single side of the story and indicates that online facilities often replicate offline power structures, which questions the emancipatory potential of the web (ibid). Also, social media spaces, similarly to other mediums, often embody commodified spaces (ibid). A Utopian excitement with the amelioration of communicative technologies is not a new phenomenon, but as Downing et al. (2001) note, all these technologies ended up becoming a part of an industry that is oriented on making a profit, instead of enhancing the democratization of societies. Additionally, Murthy indicates that social media can foster certain types of hierarchy, create new elites and cause informational overload (Murthy, 2018). As the author puts it, “social media may “empower” individuals to have a voice (Murthy, 2016), but this could also lead to high levels of noise” (2018, p.2).

Other researchers focus more on the social media usage practices for advocating human rights. Guo and Saxton claim that social media platforms have opened new platforms for advocacy organizations “to facilitate relationship building and stakeholder engagement” (2013, p.4).

1.3.2. Digital Media and Vulnerable Social Groups

The role of digital media in the process of empowering vulnerable societal groups and individuals has been studied in the context of children, disabled people, women, etc. (Bühler and Pelka, 2014; Wauters, Lievens and Valcke, 2016; Ammari and Schoenebeck, 2015; Fisher, 2016; Stavrositu and Sundar, 2012). ICTs and social media have been studied extensively in the
context of empowering minorities and marginalized groups of society (Mehra, Merkel and Bishop, 2004; Casero-Ripollés, 2017). While focusing on the role of the internet in the process of empowering societal groups like low-income families, sexual minorities and African-American woman, Mehra, Merkel and Bishop state that “The internet has tremendous potential to achieve greater social equity and empowerment and improve everyday life for those on the margins of society” (2004, p.781). Casero-Ripollés, studying the creation of political content by the vulnerable members of society claims that use of social media by these people is depended more on social and cultural capital rather than financial (2017). According to Casero-Ripollés, although web 2.0 can be a mighty equalizer, it can also enforce the existing inequalities and “while it is true, that social media can enable citizen empowerment, it does not automatically occur” (2017, p.18).

As mentioned, queer people remain as one of the most oppressed and vulnerable societal groups. Most importantly for the purposes of this study, the role of ICTs, and particularly, of social media, has been researched in the queer context also. Some studies focus more on the personal usage of ICTs. For example, the role of the computer-mediated communication (CMC) in queer people’s lives has been the topic of scientific enquiry since the creation of early Internet Relay Chats (IRC) (Shaw, 1997; Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008). Gudelunas has studied the dynamics of social networking applications commonly used by gay and bisexual men (2012). Svensson studied the Swedish queer online community Qruiser and its usage as a way of having fun, instead of participating in deliberations and producing agonistic environment (2015).

Along with personal usage, scholars also studied the use of the internet for organizing queer groups (Shapiro, 2004). Shapiro highlights two core functions of the internet that appear to be helpful for transgender organizing:” First, the Internet has become a tool for activists and organizations to use to reduce organizations’ upstart and maintenance costs and to provide quick and efficient information distribution. Second, the Internet has become a space within which to facilitate networking and collective identity development and employ new tactics, leading to the further development, growth, and success of the transgender movement” (2004, p.171).

Braquet and Mehra claim that socially marginalized groups, including the queer group, use the Internet in order to empower themselves and overcome the social restrictions imposed on them because of their marginalization (2007). Braquet and Mehra believe that the internet gives queer
individuals and groups unique opportunity to find “similar others” (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008), to receive or provide support to others or to obtain relevant information to cope with their conditions. Beyond that, the authors indicate three broad areas where the internet appears helpful for queer empowerment: personal growth, social networking and political and community engagement (ibid).

With the eruption of social media networks (SMN) like Facebook, the scholar attention has been directed to the opportunities SMNs give to queer people in order to form and reform their identities online, to create online groups, conduct activist work and organize as political entities across the web (Cooper and Dzara, 2010). Herewith, according to Cooper and Dzara, for gay individuals Facebook creates “not only the opportunities for self-presentation and social networking”, but it also creates “challenges of identity negotiation and information control” (2010, p.110).

Fox and Warber, who studied the queer identity management and political self-expression in social networking sites, claim that on the mainstream social networking sites visible queer individuals might get silenced for the reason of “spiral of silence” created by the existence of queer members who prefer to stay in closet (2014). According to the study, queer individuals who remain silent about their sexuality in social networking sites, hope for assimilating (ibid). Partially out queer individuals were trying to assimilate and accommodate at the same time, while publically out persons were enforcing or accommodating the spiral of silence (Fox and Warber, 2014).

The literature discussed above is just a small portion of the academic knowledge existing about the interrelation of queer movement, queer individuals and ICTs, namely, the social media. What is notable in the literature cited here is the lack of clarity when it comes to the notion of “empowerment”. Scholars often take the notion for granted and do not discuss in detail what might be understood as empowering and what can be assumed as disempowering in the context of social media, or what might be the components of empowerment for queer persons and the community (Braquet and Mehra, 2007; Fox and Warber, 2014; Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

Before constructing the appropriate theoretical apparatus for conducting the research, it should be emphasized that the notion of empowerment is used across a variety of academic disciplines,
including developmental studies, social work, political studies, education, public health, community psychology, etc. (Calvès, 2009). Due to the limited scope of this study, it would not be possible to cover all the disciplines and all the theoretical angles of empowerment in this literature review. Subsequently, the study has only touched upon the surface of the existing scientific knowledge about empowerment and the discussion about this concept will be deepened in the next chapter, Theoretical Framework. After the theoretical underpinnings, the study will focus on the methodological and empirical deliberations to see whether social media, namely Facebook, has a role in the process of empowering queer activists in Georgia.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1. Empowerment – Trans-disciplinary Concept and Buzzword

As it was noted above, the primary theoretical notion this thesis will deal with is empowerment, particularly empowerment from the community psychology perspective. This chapter will deliver the short overview of the concept and the path it has gone from developmental projects to becoming another buzzword in academia and different fields. Later, this section will scrutinize the theoretical foundation of the concept of empowerment in community psychology, as well as it will present different classifications of components of empowerment. Later, empowerment will be problematized regarding Media and ICTs, and the criticism towards the concept of empowerment will be offered. In the last sub-section of this chapter the operational definition of empowerment for this study will be presented, as well as some of the theoretical concepts like queerness and community will be clarified.

Empowerment, as a trans-disciplinary concept, largely related to the reinforcement of vulnerable and minority groups of the society, emerged several decades ago (Rowlands, 1995; Calvès, 2009). Since then, empowerment has gained its epistemological and practical value across the fields of sociology, social work, psychology, pedagogy, economics, organizational management, political, developmental and feminist studies (Hur, 2006; Dolničar and Fortunati, 2014). Despite the gradual increase of interest in academia towards empowerment since the 1980s, some researchers highlight that the notion is rarely defined and the understanding of it remains somewhat cloudy (Dolničar and Fortunati, 2014; Rowlands, 1995). To put it in Gallie’s words, empowerment operates as an essentially contested concept, “which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (1956, p.169). Hur distinguishes three main reasons why definition and application of empowerment remains problematic: it is multidimensional and covers political, economic, psychological or other aspects; empowerment can be seen on the level of individuals, communities or organizations; last but not least, it can be considered either as social process or the outcome of this process (2006).

Before defining empowerment and constructing the appropriate theoretical framework for the purposes of this analysis, with focus on different dimensions, levels and process-outcome
distinctions, it is useful to review how the concept has become a buzzword across disciplines, from developmental studies to community psychology (Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Hur, 2006). One of the early inspirations for the empowerment theories was the work of Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire and his work *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, published in 1968 (Hur, 2006; Calvès, 2009). On the example of rural Brazil, Freire claimed that masses were dominated and oppressed by a small number of people and advocated for the use of education to raise “critical consciousness” among the oppressed, in order for individuals to become “subjects” to make decisions by themselves about their own lives (Freire 1974 cited in Calvès, 2009). However, formally, the term empowerment for the first time was used in the book *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* published in the 1970s by Barbara Solomon (Calvès, 2009). After the early 1980s, the concept of empowerment has become more and more pervasive in social studies and has appeared intensely in community psychology, as well as in social work, educational and health programs and international developmental projects (Burton and Kagan, 1996; Calvès, 2009; Hur, 2006). Calvès credits feminist movement in Global South and radical thinkers for actualizing the concept of empowerment in women and poor-oriented developmental projects after challenging the traditional top-down developmental model (2009). On the example of developmental projects, Cornwall and Brock claim that since the mid-1990s the term “empowerment,” as well as “participation” and “poverty reduction” have become buzzwords, that “are profoundly ideological constructions” (2005, p.1055). Despite the pitfalls of overusing and misusing of the word, empowerment remains as one of the most important notions in relation with oppressed or marginalized groups of the society and Rappaport even sees it as a firmly established ideology that is an alternative to the needs/dependency model in community psychology (1981). Community psychology is one of the disciplines in which the word empowerment is most frequently used (Hur, 2006, p.524). This analysis will focus on community empowerment and accordingly, in the next sections based on this understanding the theoretical framework will be delineated.

### 2.2. Community Empowerment
In this sub-section of the chapter, first, different definitions of the empowerment will be offered from community psychology perspective, accompanied with the theoretical underpinnings of powerlessness and power. Later, empowerment will be problematized as a process and outcome of this process, as well as, different classification of empowerment analysis will be presented. Lastly, this sub-section will inform the reader about the classification of the empowerment components, developed by several scholars, after which the chapter will switch into theoretical discussions about media, ICTs and empowerment.

2.2.1. Empowerment, Powerlessness and Power

In community psychology, with the broadest understanding of the concept, empowerment refers to the mechanism or the process of the change in individuals, communities, groups of societies or organizations to gain the ability of making improvements in their lives and overcoming the structural constraints to enjoy the material, political, economic, cultural and social opportunities (Rappaport, 1987; Hur, 2006; Schulz et al., 1995; Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989 cited in Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). Rappaport highlights that empowerment as a phenomenon of interest touches upon the “individual determination over one's own life” as well as social, political, and legal dimensions of communities (1987, p.121). According to Zimmerman, “Empowerment is both a value orientation for working in the community and a theoretical model for understanding the process and consequences of efforts to exert control and influence over decisions that affect one's life, organizational functioning, and the quality of community life” (2000).

Instead of the direct definition of empowerment, it is possible to clarify what this notion means with the help of its absence (Rappaport, 1984). Accordingly, empowerment is related to the sense of powerlessness that might be the reason for the social disturbances for individuals as well as larger groups of the society (Hur, 2006). Based on Solomon’s ideas Hur understands powerlessness as “the inability to manage emotions, skills, knowledge, and material resources in a way that will lead to the effective performance of valued social roles and personal gratification” (2006, p.529). Based on this, powerlessness can be seen as the shortage of resources, abilities, opportunities to take part in decision-making processes related to one’s own living conditions. Thus, empowerment as a process should give people ability to remove the state
of powerlessness with the help of the tools and abilities to make decisions about their own lives (Rowlands, 1995).

In both scenarios, much of the emphasis comes to the word “power”, and as Rowlands highlights, problems regarding clarity of empowerment are partially caused by the disruptive nature of the root-concept “power” (1995). These two notions are inherently connected, but not the same (Zimmerman, 1995). Hence, to articulate explicitly what we mean in empowerment relies on our understanding of power. The question of power is essential here for at least two reasons: according to Foucault, it has a spatial dimension; thus, spaces are vital while talking about it and power is relational as we speak not only about spaces but also about the social sphere (Fortunati, 2014). Fortunati believes that empowerment is somewhat similar to power with these two features: it is spatial but more prone to horizontal, nonhierarchical relationships and it is relational and asymmetrical as there is always someone with more and someone with less power (2000).

Spatial and relational nature of power lets researchers distinguish various processes of empowerment, namely “power upon” and “power toward” (McLean 1966 cited in Fortunati, 2014). In the first case, the relatively powerful actor tries to modify the behavior of the powerless ones, and in this way, powerful actors reconfirm their power position. In case of “power toward,” powerful actors use their power to let powerless actors to overcome their power position (ibid).

Here, Pratto notes that keeping the relational view of power creates some difficulties while studying it as the emphasis remains on the agency of more powerful actors and misses the perspective of the less powerful actors (2015). Pratto confirms that power is the most crucial social phenomena, but also she abandons the social-relational definition of power. Instead, she describes power as “the state of being able to meet one’s goals” and according to her, “it is linked with inequality, injustice, well-being, deprivation, historical and political dynamics, social organization, humans’ relationships with one another and with the natural ecology, and the quality of people’s lives (2015, p.15).

Pratto’s definition of power stands close to the main theoretical concept of this thesis, empowerment and shows that Fortunati’s classification, mentioned before, is not specific enough (Pratto, 2015; Fortunati, 2014). Besides, it holds a perspective of the less powerful actors of the
social relations that resonates to the power position of queer persons in Georgian societal hierarchy. Thus, instead of exploiting Fortunati’s classification, it should be mentioned that Neal distinguishes three different definitions of empowerment, “ranging from a personal sense of efficacy and control (“power to”) to actual control over desired resources (“power over”) to shared aspects of power (“power with”)” (2013, p.395). In Neals’ definitions, there is a space for powerless actors to strive for a better power position without necessarily implying the powerless actors’ involvement. This classification becomes even more important when we emphasize powerless actors’ ability to gain more control and mastery over their lives by themselves. In this case, instead of powerful actors or individuals, the settings should be empowering. By Neals’ understanding, empowering settings are ones that let members of the community to work inclusively for the equal distribution of resources and to have an actual opportunity to enjoy the outcomes (2013).

2.2.2. Process/Outcome distinction and levels of Empowerment analysis

“Consequences of efforts” in Zimmerman’s definition mentioned above indicates that empowerment should be understood not only as a process but, equally importantly, as an outcome (Zimmerman, 2000). This distinction between the process and the outcome becomes important while evaluating the achieved results of the process within the scope of different actions, activities or structures (Hur, 2006; Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). As Zimmerman describes, empowering process might refer to the act of gaining control or mastery over the life and desired resources for individuals or groups to solve problems, participate in decision-making and improve the social environment (2000). Meanwhile, empowerment outcomes might imply “situation-specific perceived control, skills, and proactive behaviors, […] organizational networks, effective resource acquisition, […] existence of organizational coalitions, and accessible community resources” (Zimmerman, 2000, p.46).

Another major aspect of empowerment is distinctions regarding the levels of analysis as it is “multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighborhoods” (Rappaport, 1987). Different scholars choose different approaches towards the levels of analysis. With the simplest classification, there are only individual and collective empowerments, while according to Lord and Hutchison, the process and the outcome of the empowerment might be observed on three levels: individual, group and community levels (Hur,
Dolničar and Fortunati also add class as a level to this classification (2014). For Zimmerman, along with individual and community levels, the organizational level of analysis is also important (2000). As far as individual empowerment is the most commonly studied in existing empirical researches, it is important to highlight that these levels of analysis are mutually interdependent and they affect each other (Zimmerman, 2000; Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Lord and Hutchison, 1993). Zimmerman believes that it is impossible to imagine an empowered community or organization with powerless members but with an important note that empowered groups or communities does not simply mean the sum of the empowered individuals (2000). Empowerment by its nature is a social process that requires constant interactions, including conflicts, or, as Keiffer puts it in his seminal work about personal empowerment, “in the struggle towards empowerment, conflict and growth are inextricably intertwined” (1984, p.25).

Before moving to the certain tools to measure the process or outcomes of empowerment in community psychology, an important remark should be made. Empowerment is not only a multilevel but also a context-dependent concept (Rappaport 1987). Hence, to study the process of gaining more power by powerless actors should always be put in the context of the particular community. Therefore, empowerment takes distinct form for specific people in different contexts, and components of it also vary (Zimmerman, 2000).

2.2.3. Components of Community Empowerment

For the reason of context-dependency and the multilevel nature of empowerment, both as a process and as an outcome, different researchers conceptualize components of community empowerment variously. As mentioned above, Zimmerman distinguishes the individual, organizational and community empowerment and for each, he identifies different components (2000). According to this classification, the individual level consists of intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral components. The intrapersonal component means perceived control or beliefs about one’s competence to make decisions that affect his or her life. Interactional components refer to the person’s ability to be critically aware of the political or socio-economic conditions around, or the ability to assess his or her own power position. Lastly, Behavioral component indicates individual’s participation in different processes, including those in a particular community and the larger society. On the organizational level, Zimmerman talks about
the organizations’ ability to provide opportunities for individuals or the communities to gain control over their lives, to affect policy decisions, or to have better access to the services (2000). Speaking of the community level, Zimmerman refers to “the contexts in which organizations and individuals interact to enhance community living, and ensure that their communities address local needs and concerns” (2000, p.58).

2.1 Levels and components of empowerment by Zimmerman (1995)

Zimmerman’s classification of empowerment components seems more developed and detailed regarding individual empowerment but stays somewhat vague about organizational and community levels. Hence it is necessary to zoom in the non-individual levels of empowerment and introduce Hur’s classification. As discussed above, Hur denotes two levels of analysis in the process of community psychology: individual and collective (2006). Accordingly, in this classification, the components of empowerment are different but partially overlapping with Zimmerman’s components. First, Hur distinguishes five stages of empowerment: an existing social disturbance, conscientizing, mobilizing, maximizing, and creating a new order (2006, p.535). Later he identifies four components of empowerment, both on individual and collective levels that affect all five stages of empowerment. On the individual level, these components are: 1. Meaning; 2. Competence; 3. Self-determination; 4. Impact. On the collective level, the
components of empowerments are: 1. Collective belonging; 2. Involvement in community; 3. Control over organization; and 4. Community building. Hur’s classification of collective empowerment components implies that “the goal of collective empowerment is to establish community building, so that members of a given community can feel a sense of freedom, belonging, and power that can lead to constructive social change” (ibid).

2.2 Levels and components of empowerment by Hur (2006)

As mentioned earlier, this study situates itself on the intersection of media studies and community psychology. Accordingly, to have the complete picture of the theoretical aspects of empowerment, it is crucial to complete the theoretical discussion with the help of media studies perspective. Subsequently, the next sub-chapter will discuss the media and ICT outlook of empowerment and the components of the empowerment process within this context.

2.3 Components of Empowerment from media and ICT perspective

Empowerment is discussed from the media studies perspective by Cammaerts, DeCillia and Zurn (2017). They share the above-mentioned approach that to see the dimensions of empowerment, first of all, it is needed to discuss the nature of power (ibid). Accordingly, Cammaerts, DeCillia
and Zurn, delineate three central areas about empowerment and media: *temporal, spatial* and *strategic* dimensions (2017). The temporal dimension refers to technological advancements and the increased number of tools for agents to make social change. In terms of spatial dimension, they note that “tools of communication can also empower people to move through spaces, to connect people across spaces, and to define and create new spaces” (2017, p.15). And finally, Cammaerts, DeCillia and Zurn believe that communicative tools can empower agents as they can use language strategically to pursue their agenda (ibid).

Today, informational and communication technologies (ICTs) have become ubiquitous in people’s lives, and the Internet plays a vital role in increasing individuals and communities capacities for social action (Petrič and Petrovčič, 2014; Pirannejad and Janssen, 2017). On this premises and based on the purposes of this study, it would be appropriate to see how researchers conceptualize the empowerment components in the realm of the internet. Empowerment through the Internet is related to the involvement of digital platforms like websites, blogs, messaging applications, forums or social networks in the process of helping people to do things easier, cheaper and quicker than without their involvement (Pirannejad and Janssen, 2017).

Different researchers have suggested several classifications for online empowerment components. Amichai-Hamburger et al. offer four-level analysis of empowerment: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and citizenship level (2008). On the intrapersonal level, individuals can negotiate and re-negotiate their identities, re-evaluate their self-concept as well as develop their social or strategic skills. Also, through the Internet people can increase their perception of self-efficacy as “the Internet provides numerous opportunities for various kinds of mastery experiences that occur in non-threatening environments” (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008, p. 1779). On the interpersonal level, the users of ICTs can improve their social communication skills, overcome loneliness and social awkwardness, as internet suggests different forms of self-representation on its terrain, creates conditions for higher self-disclosure and stereotype use reduction, especially for people who identify themselves as members of negatively stereotyped groups of the society (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008). On the group level, the Internet helps people find “similar others,” to diversify mechanisms for decision-making; reinforce group identity and crystallization process. Finally, the citizenship level is related to political participation, increasing accessibility to e-tools regarding engaging in discussions about
community or legislative initiatives and influencing the governmental decisions (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008).

2.3 Levels and components of empowerment by Amichai-Hamburger et al., (2008)

A different categorization has been proposed by Petrič and Petrovčič, who study the role of communicative interaction on web forums in the process of individual and collective empowerment (2014). According to this classification, individual empowerment has three major factors: 1) Cognitive - the knowledge-building factors that enhance people’s decision-making abilities with the help of information transactions; 2) Relational – establishing secured communication with like-minded people and affinity-groups and receiving the social support; and 3) Expressive – writing and representing one’s self, identity and sharing experiences with the help of mediated communications (ibid).
With this interpretation, collective empowerment means not only enhancing the capacities of the online communities and its members but also benefiting to the broader, offline environment and highlights three main components: 1) sense of community, referring the building and reinforcing group members’ relationships; 2) community organization, in the sense of individuals’ active engagement in group discussions and decisions; and 3) community participation, meaning individuals’ involvement in community activities, namely, in protests and other offline collective initiatives (Petrič and Petrovčič, 2014).

2.4 Levels and components of empowerment by Petrič and Petrovčič, (2014)

Disclosing the different approaches towards the community empowerment, in both online and offline life, shows that unified, unequivocal categorization of its components does not exist. Nevertheless, comparing these categories demonstrates similarities, and very often they overlap. Reckoning the fact that empowerment is a context-dependent concept and assuming that each and every community has its own peculiar historical, social, political, cultural or economic conditions, for the analysis of empowering Georgian queer activists through Facebook it is useful to develop an operational definition of empowerment and its components. To avoid the technodeterministic and overly optimistic path, before demonstrating the appropriate apparatus to theoreticize the components of empowerment in this particular occasion, some critical reflections about the notion of empowerment will be presented.
2.5. Is Empowerment Enough? - Criticism of the Concept

Despite Rappaport’s belief that empowerment is a “pervasive positive value,” this concept has been criticized for various reasons across the different fields, including developmental studies and community empowerment (1987, p.121; Calvès, 2009). Calvès has identified several main clusters of criticism towards empowerment in the field of development (2009). First and foremost, empowerment has been problematized as fashionable, exceedingly optimistic but in practice, a rarely defined term that has ambiguous goals, those that are practically impossible to implement (ibid). It has become a hegemonic concept on the field that, by a Gramscian understanding, means that it is has moved “beyond contests over meaning to unquestioned acceptance” (Cornwall and Brock, 2005, p.1054). Most importantly, empowerment has been criticized for excessive emphasis on individual capacities and lack of focus on actual political mobilization and participation as well as missing of psychological or social aspects of power in developmental projects (Calvès, 2009).

Criticism of empowerment in community psychology partially resonates with the problematization of the notion in the field of development studies. Riger criticizes the traditional approach of community psychology towards empowerment on two premises: a) its emphasis on cognitive processes that usually leads to asymmetrically significant attention towards individual level of empowering; and b) its concentration in community psychology around the concepts that are associated with masculinity and men, like agency, mastery, and control, instead of “concerns typically associated with femininity and women such as community and connections with others” (1993, p. 280). On the example of Zimmerman’s, Kieffer’s and Rappaport’s approaches, Riger claims that the dominant understanding of empowerment emphases individuals’ “sense of control” and “the belief in their efficacy” that is problematic when it comes to real empowerment of communities or its members. In his words, “the individual's experience of power or powerlessness may be unrelated to actual ability to influence, and an increase in the sense of empowerment does not always reflect an increase in actual power” (1993, p.282).

Empowerment might also be problematic as, in most cases, it is understood as “power to” or “power over”. This understanding refers to the capacity of individuals or members of groups to act within some realm through power-sharing or have access to some resources, but it overlooks
“power from” conceptualization that puts more emphasis on resisting the actual power (Riger, 1993). Additionally, based on Sarason’s ideas, Riger underlines the ironic shift in the dominant ideology of community psychology, as empowerment became the phenomenon of interest in the discipline, instead of the “sense of community” (Rappaport, 1987). Among the reasons of this shift, he notes too much emphasis on notions as agency, mastery, and control in the theory and the research of community psychology that dismissed “the role of connectedness in human life” (Riger, 1993, p.286).

For social change, some scholars also offer to look for a better alternative, since empowerment is unable to provide the radical social, political or economic change, for example, at the workplaces or in educational institutions (Inglis, 1997). Inglis claims that empowermenental approach emphases the individual responsibilities and instead of changing the whole system of power relations, it is located comfortably within the existing system and only offers individuals to transform themselves and to adjust to the goals and directions of the organization (1997). As an alternative, he suggests the notion of emancipation. In order to analyze empowerment and emancipation, Inglis highlights the need to examine power. With the Foucauldian tradition, Inglis approaches power not as something that is static and fixed, but as something that pre-exists us and circulates within and among us. Thus, power decides what is the truth in individuals’ lives and to change the whole system empowerment is not a useful concept as it works within the borders of existing power relations, “while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power” (Inglis, 1997, p.4). Because of the ever-changing nature of power that is in constant flux, there is no end for power. Therefore, the only way to achieve freedom is to resist, rather than to offer adjustments to the system that is provided by the concept of empowerment (ibid).

2.6. Operationalization

Despite the ambivalent stance towards empowerment, researchers acknowledge the transformative potential of the notion (Inglis, 1997; Riger, 1993). Even the most critical authors, including Inglis or Riger do not abandon the idea and the opportunities that empowerment
creates for individuals and communities. On the example of individual transformative learning, Inglis claims that empowerment might not be sufficient for the powerless to achieve absolute freedom, but he also admits that it is necessary (1997). Riger does not entirely give up the value of empowerment either (1993). Instead, he talks about challenging community psychology to adopt not only the vision of empowerment but also the perspective of the community, to emphasize not only the differences that exist between the different groups of society but also the similarities (ibid).

Before offering the operational definition of empowerment appropriate in the scope of this study and identifying the relevant components for the levels of analysis, several premises should be underlined. First and foremost, empowerment process should not be perceived as a discrete process that might have a logical ending. To put it in Spreizer’s words, “empowerment is a continuous variable”; thus, the subject and the objects of this process should not be seen as empowered or not empowered but as more or less empowered (Spreizer, 1995, p.1444 cited in Lee and Koh, 2001). In this sense, empowerment resembles the notion of participation that, according to Carpentier, does not have an endpoint and resonates to Samuel Beckett’s word: “Ever tried. Ever failed. Never mind. Try again. Fail better” (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013).

Based on the abovementioned premises and the fact that empowerment is a context-specific notion, in terms of Georgian queer activists’ usage of Facebook this study defines empowerment as a process and a outcome of increasing political, economic or social capacities for queer people to gain mastery over their lives individually and as a community, to overcome the societal constraints and oppression, improve their power position in relation with other groups of the society and gain necessary resources for a better life.

In this definition, empowerment is understood as an active verb that implies social actors’ capacity to challenge power relations and not remain in a passive position, waiting for the powerful actors to share resources and knowledge with them to achieve social change (Fortunati, 2014). To exploit this operational definition, empowerment will be analyzed on three levels, namely, on intrapersonal, interpersonal and community levels. Following the theoretical discussions above, each of the levels has components that were elaborated with the help of theoretically informed data analysis. A detailed discussion about the levels and the components
of the queer activists’ empowerment will be delivered in the theoretical and the analytical parts of the thesis, during and after demonstrating the analysis method of the conducted study.

Furthermore, following Foucault’s conceptualization of power as a spatial notion, in this understanding of empowerment, spaces matter, namely Facebook, as an online space where people gather in some digital venue where the interactional process takes place (Fortunati, 2014). Based on this, Facebook in this study is problematized as a setting with a potential to enable the conditions of empowerment in order to “provide inclusive activities that allow members to work toward the equal distribution of resources (i.e., empowering processes) and have the actual outcome of increasing the equal distribution of resources (i.e., empowered outcomes)” (Neal, 2013, p.395).

Being a queer activist requires both personal commitments and responsibilities and at the same time affiliations to a particular societal group, based on one’s decision to position publicly as oppositional to the normative notions of sexuality. Broadly speaking, to define queerness might seem self-abolishing, as it functions as an umbrella term for any kind of culturally marginalized sexual self-identification, with the premises of its terminological elasticity (Jagose 1996). As Judith Butler notes, “normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish” (1994, p.21 cited in Jagose 1996). Hill contemplates that the queer movement that emerged in the 1990s as the response to the simplicity of Lesbian and Gay movement as overtly focused on the essence of identity challenges the mainstream comprehension of gender and human sexuality (2004).

As far as “queer is about being politically, culturally, and socially dissident”, it only exists if it is practiced and related to the outer world (Hill, 2004, p.86). Subsequently, conceptualization of Georgian activists’ queerness and their empowerment through Facebook requires analysis on the intrapersonal level as it refers to the self-identificatory character of queerness. Simultaneously, it needs the interpersonal and community levels of analysis as it is related to the social world.

Another term that might need theoretical clarification is a community. Discussing community empowerment in the organizational domain, Laverack and Wallerstein define community as a collective of heterogeneous individuals who take action together to achieve the shared goals (2001). As this definition seems too broad, Graves defines community as “an inherently cooperative, cohesive, and self-reflective group entity whose members work on a regular face-to-
face basis toward common goals while respecting a variety of perspectives, values, and life styles” (1992, p.64). However, Graves definition emphases face-to-face interaction that might be irrelevant while talking about the usage of a social networking site like Facebook. If Facebook will be seen as a form of new media, where Georgian queer activists participate in the communicative processes, Pullen’s term “imagined gay community” might give us a fuller picture (2012). According to Pullen, “Participatory new media stimulates the coalescence of an imagined gay community, formed through the sharing of narratives” (2012, p.136). Accordingly, based on these deliberations, we can define community as an inherently cohesive group of heterogeneous individuals who work to achieve the shared goals online and offline.

After the deliberations about the main theoretical framework and its operationalization, it is needed to look at the settings where the process of empowerment might take place. According to the purpose of this study, Georgian queer activists should be studied within the settings of Facebook. Before we switch to the analyzing the functions of Facebook used by Georgian queer activists, in the next section the methodology of obtaining and analyzing relevant data will be discussed. Also ethical considerations and study limitations will be presented.
Chapter 3: Research Design

As it was stated above, this study is interested in how Georgian queer activists perceive the role of a certain social media network as a possible component of their empowerment. To serve the interests of the study qualitative methods have been selected to conduct the research, namely netnographic observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Qualitative research aims to explore and explain the meanings that social processes or phenomena get ascribed by the members of the society (Creswell, 2014). According to Ritchie and Lewis, some scholars define qualitative research regarding features it does not have (2003, p.3). Unlike quantitative research that employs a discrete number of variables and searches for the connections between them, qualitative research is based on the description and interpretation of research objects or cases (Sudweeks and Simoff, 1990). Based on these premises, the study will exploit qualitative research methods to unravel the meanings of Facebook Georgian queer activists ascribe to this particular social media network while doing their activist work. Additionally, as the study does not focus on correlations or discrete numbers of variables to make general claims, applicable to all the Georgian queer activists, qualitative research methods would create the possibility to gather the relevant data in order to answer the main research question: In what ways do Georgian queer activists get empowered through their use of Facebook?

In this chapter the sampling of the research participants will be discussed, as well as the process of data gathering, short description of the study participants, ethical implications and the limitations of the conducted research that will be followed by the method of analysis.

3.1. Sampling

The first stage of conducting research was to determine the sample of the research participants. The sample design is a selection process of cases from a specific population (Sullivan and Losberg, 2003). In the context of this research, the specific population can be identified as the Georgian queer activists. Based on the theoretical underpinnings above, a Georgian queer activist is defined here as a person of any class, race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality preferences, who
does not position and perform oneself as representative of the normative sexuality in relation with the larger society and is engaged with the community- or public-oriented activities, by occupation or voluntarily, within the Georgian society.

For this study, the sample designing process has been conducted in two steps. To explore the Georgian queer activists’ Facebook usage for their individual and community empowerment, originally, 19 potential participants were identified through random selection. The possible participants have been determined based on my knowledge of a Georgian queer activists’ circle, as I was volunteering in the LGBTQ community organization Diversity Research and Community Activism Association (DRCAA) in 2010. Also, between 2013 and 2016, I was the communication manager in the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), a membership-based human rights NGO that works for the protection of rights of oppressed societal groups, including LGBTQ people (Emc.org.ge, 2018). Thus, for the pre-research period, I already knew several Georgian queer activists. After offering to 6 of them to participate in the study, all of them agreed to collaborate.

However, I have not been actively involved in any kind of social activism in Georgia during the last two years. To avoid the inconsistencies caused by the lack of my engagement and familiarity into the up-to-date Georgian queer activism, for the second step of the sample design a snowball sampling was chosen. Using snowball sampling is an approved method in sexuality studies as it concerns to the individuals and groups that are “often ‘hidden’ because openly identifying with specific factions or lifestyles can result in discrimination” (Browne, 2005, p.48). Accordingly, two of the queer activists from random selection who agreed to participate in the research has been the key persons to recruit the other 4 participants of the study. One participant has been recruited after the consultations with my old colleague from EMC, who works specifically on LGBTQ issues in the scope of the organization.

In total, 11 persons have been selected to participate in the study. On the later stage, one of the participants was not able to give an interview. Accordingly, the Facebook data of the participant was also dismissed for the research purposes.
3.2. Participants

As I indicated above, 10 persons were recruited for participating in the study through the sampling process. Final participants of the research were: Nikolo, Ira, Levan, Natia, Giorgi, Koba, Miranda, Nukri, Emzo and Beka.

Out of 10 participants, 8 were between 23 and 30 years old. The other two participants were 31 and 45 years old. 7 of the participants lived and worked in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. One participant lived in Poti and worked in Zugdidi. One of the activists had moved to Lund, Sweden, several months before the research was conducted. Another participant had moved abroad during the study period to seek asylum in one of the countries in Europe.

When it comes to gender identity and sexuality, one of the activists identified herself as a transgender woman (pronoun She), two of the participants as gay males (pronoun He), two participants – queer (pronoun He), one participant – queer (pronoun They), one participant – transgender man (pronoun He), one participant – lesbian woman (pronoun She), one participant – non-binary trans (They) and one of the activists noted that she perceives herself as non-binary, but politically she positions herself as a lesbian woman (pronoun She).

Out of the 10 activists, 6 were employed in the biggest LGBTQ community organization in Georgia, the Equality Movement, including the executive director of the organization (Equality Movement, 2018). One was an employee of the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights (RFSL). One activist, along with one of the employees from Equality Movement, was engaged in organizing Horoom Nights, series of queer nights in one of the biggest techno clubs in Georgia (Horoom Nights, 2018). One activist was an employee of another local NGO, Tanadgoma, that works in the field of sexual and reproductive health, inter alia, high-risk behavior groups, like men who have sex with men (MSM) (New.tanadgomaweb.ge, 2018). One activist was working as a guest teacher at the Tbilisi State University.

Only two participants had less than 1 000 Facebook friends on their social media accounts. Two of them had more than 4 000 Facebook friends, and the average number of friends on Facebook for all the activists was 2 842. All of the activists were positioning themselves as openly queer.
persons on their Facebook profiles, and they usually shared at least three or more Facebook posts a week.

3.3 Data collection

Two data gathering methods have been used to see how the Georgian queer activists use Facebook for empowerment: netnographic observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kozinets, 2015). By data we mean the “systematically collected elements of information” that would be in accordance with the research purposes (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, p.23). For the study, such elements of information were Facebook posts and the interview transcripts.

On the first stage of data gathering, a one-month netnographic observation was conducted on the Facebook profiles of the recruited queer activists. According to Kozinets, “Netnography is the name given to a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet…” (2015, Ch3). Thus, netnography was chosen as a data-gathering material for the following reasons. Firstly, the research topic refers to Facebook, a social media network that exists and functions online. Secondly, netnography gives the opportunity to explore scientifically how individuals or communities experience certain online social interaction (Kozinets, 2015). The focus of this thesis is to study the interactional processes on Facebook.

Communication with the participants has been established through Facebook before the start of the data collection process. Netnographic observation has been conducted between March 1 and 31. During this period, all the Facebook posts shared by the participants or posts in which the participants were tagged, but the tag was approved by the participants, have been collected by the screenshotting extension of a Google Chrome browser “Full Page Screen Capture” and archived offline in JPG format (Chrome.google.com, 2018).

After three weeks of observation, 10 in-depth online interviews were conducted with the same persons who had been selected for the online observation. As Kozinets defines, online
interviewing is a type of conversation with a predetermined set of questionnaire and anticipated answers, mediated with some technological appliance (2015). Interviews were conducted in the time period of March 25 and April 4 via Skype and Facebook messenger. As Hanna discuss, using software programs or applications, like Skype as a research medium for semi-structured interviews adds a visual element and thus the opportunity to hold a “face-to-face” interaction with the respondents, while still maintaining the flexibility and “private space” that telephone interviews offer (2012). The interviews have been conducted in the Georgian language, and the average length of the interviews was 51 minutes. Interviews were fully transcribed in the Georgian language for the later parts of the analysis.

3.4. Ethical implications

Ethical issues in research usually relate to the involvement of human beings in the process of conducting a study (Behi and Nolan, 1995). According to Behi and Nolan, most guidelines for human subject research include the issues of confidentiality, issues of obtaining informed consent and maintaining the balance between the interests of individuals and the society (1995). But specifically for netnographic research, based on Tom Boellstorff and colleagues’ (2012) guidelines about doing an ethical online research, also based on Internet Research Ethics (IRE) and Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) recommendations, Kozinets delineates the following core issues to be taken into consideration: stating researchers name explicitly (using existing social media accounts), ensuring publicity of the obtained data, obtaining informed consent, following a “do no harm online” policy, guaranteeing confidentiality and taking into account legal considerations, asking permission and crediting the sources appropriately (2015). Thinking of the state of vulnerability of the queer individuals and their human rights circumstances in Georgia, it should be emphasized that ethical implications explicitly related to the representatives of this particular group have significant importance. According to the LGBT Foundation, while doing research about people who identify themselves as representatives of non-normative sexuality, it is important to take in consideration several aspects, including fully informing researchers and participants, confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary participation and avoiding harm (LGBT Foundation, n.d.).
Following the above-mentioned ethical concerns, before starting the netnographic observation, informed consent was obtained from every participant via messaging through Facebook with my own Facebook profile. In the introductory message, the purpose of the research, time limits and the scale of potentially exploited data was explained to the participants. It was repeated twice to the participants that the researcher would observe their Facebook activities for one month and that later, the gathered data would be used for the purposes of the study.

Before beginning the observation, the activists were asked about the issues of confidentiality of their identity. None of the participants desired to be anonymous, and all of them engaged in the process of research voluntarily. Based on the fact that the research subjects are the members of the societal group whose visibility in a broader society has vital importance and all of them wanted to participate with their real names, the research uses the first names that participants use on their Facebook profile. Herewith, considering the vulnerability of the societal groups that participants belong to, direct identification of the research subjects has been avoided, including eradicating their surnames and the direct Facebook links to their profiles. With these measures of precocious, the research will avoid the undesired “outing” of the study participants, even in case of the unforeseen risks. This decision has been made after receiving the information that queer persons, including the activists, in Georgia often experience cyber-bullying and have to deal with the hate messages or threatening constantly.

Several measures have been taken to avoid harming the human subjects of the research and the group these people belong to. First of all, none of the persons, who were active on the timelines of the research participants, have been identified within the scope of this research. Direct quoting of the non-research participant persons has been avoided in order not to make it possible to search the persons according to their quotes. The analysis of the data (both Facebook posts and interviews) showed several cases when queer activists had conflicts with each other. To avoid the risks of re-igniting the conflicts, none of the participants of the conflicts, except for the research participants, have been identified.

Finally, another ethical issue addressed in this research relates to using pronouns of the human subjects of the study. As Foertsch and Gernsbacher note, increasing number of people ignore grammatical proscription and use the plural pronoun they to refer to themselves for the sake of gender inclusivity (1997). Out of 10 respondents, two preferred to be referred as singular They.
One participant noted that there was no difference for him so that he could be referred either as singular *They* or *He*.

### 3.5. Methodological Limitations

Before switching to the analysis method of the gathered material, several limitations of the study should be highlighted. As Brutus, Aguinis and Wassmer claim, based on Ioannidis’ ideas, limitations section is helpful to realize the actual drawbacks of the research in to set the study in the context and raise its credibility level (2012).

One of the limitations of the thesis is related to the research data. All the material for analysis was obtained and investigated in Georgian language and only the result of the analysis, namely the codebook, was translated into English. As DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall and McCulloch note “a codebook is a set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyze interview data” (2010, p.138). Thus, despite our efforts to be as accurate as possible, the process of translation might have affected to the presentation of the findings as well as the accuracy of the research participants’ quotes.

The research also has limitations regarding sample size, as it is based on the data obtained from 10 participants only. The majority of the participants (five of them) identified themselves as male (with a pronoun *He*), only three as trans persons, two as lesbians, and one as non-binary. Accordingly, the research might have inclinations to represent a more male version of reality. However, the decisions made concerning data sampling were motivated by an important disclaimer. The purpose of the research was not to conduct the representational research, which would give us an opportunity to generalize the study findings about all the queer activists in Georgia. The study holds a more phenomenological approach that emphasizes the participants’ experiences and their perceptions towards a certain social phenomenon, in this case, Facebook (Carswerl, 2007). Also, the study does not give a picture about the perceptions of the queer community in general, as the focus of the study was the activists’ interpretations.
The research also had limitations in terms of time. A one-month period was taken for the online observation, considering the amount of data that might be produced on the Facebook profiles of participants. Several days might have affected the content of the posts shared by the queer activists. Namely, on March 8th, there was the Women’s International Day, that is usually celebrated by feminists and the supporters of feminists. Also, since 2009, on March 31st the queer community celebrates the Transgender Day of Visibility (Carreras in media, 2018).

Finally, another limitation of the study derives from the nature of the data gathered during the research. Hanke indicates that interview data usually have a problem with replicability and reliability (Hancké, 2009). Accordingly, the way of analysis and the interpretation might have “a shadow of arbitrariness” of the researcher (ibid, p.107). To avoid the ambiguity about the decisions made during the analysis, we tried to base our method of analysis on the academically approved literature that will be described in the next sub-section.

3.6. Method of analysis

After finishing the observation, the Facebook posts were sorted out based on their relevance. The primary indicator of the relevant Facebook posts was the content of the shared information. Thus, the Facebook posts that were not related to the queer individuals, queer community, other oppressed groups of society, or individuals, groups or institutions that ideologically or in practice oppose the queer community, have been disregarded for the later steps of the analysis. The vast majority of the Facebook posts were published in the Georgian language. A small amount of Facebook posts were published in English or Russian language.

For the first cycle of analysis, 10 posts with a random selection were chosen from the data of each participant. Accordingly, in total, 100 Facebook posts shared by the Georgian queer activists and 10 transcribed interviews were coded. Here, codes are understood as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles and Huberman 1994, p.56 cited in DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall and McCulloch, 2010). Facebook posts and interviews were coded with descriptive open-ended codes. According to Saldaña, descriptive coding sums up in tags or labels the main topic of the units of analysis.
(2013). In case of Facebook posts, units of analysis vary from entire Facebook posts, if the post was reposted from someone or some other medium without a comment of the participant to the several sentences if the post contained personal comment by the participant.

As Morse notes, “an edict of qualitative research is “to collect data until saturation occurs” (1995, p.147). Saturation in qualitative research is understood as reaching the point where no new information is obtained with the further analysis (ibid). After coding the Facebook posts, during the first cycle of our analysis, saturation was achieved even before the coding of the selected 100 posts. Accordingly, it was not needed to code additional Facebook posts, and the patterns were determined based on the codes derived from interviews and 100 Facebook posts shared by the selected queer activists. When it comes to interviews, as Hancké claims, when the researcher uses the interview materials, the data is made by the researcher himself/herself with the help of systematizing, ordering and reporting (2009). Accordingly, the codes based on the essence of the paragraphs were determined to systematize and order the information derived from the transcribed interviews.

To sum up, on the first stage, the interviews and Facebook posts were exploited to answer the first research sub-question:

**RQ1**: which empowerment-related functions are identified through the Georgian queer activists’ use of Facebook?

The study relies on the information delivered in the scope of interviews to answer the 2nd and the 3rd research sub-questions. While answering these questions, to illustrate the Facebook activities respondents discuss in the interviews, the study used all the Facebook posts that were responding to the criteria of relevance, discussed above. The 2nd and the 3rd research sub-questions had the following formulation:

**RQ2**: What is Georgian queer activists’ self-perception of empowerment through the use of Facebook?

**RQ3**: What are the challenges Georgian queer activists face through their use of Facebook?
In this chapter methodological aspects of the conducted study have been discussed. First, information about the sample design was delivered, that was followed by the review of the selected participants and the scope of the gathered data. Later ethical implications and the limitations of the study were outlined. Finally, the method of the analysis, as well as, sub-questions of the research was presented, that will be answered in the next chapter of the thesis. After presenting the study results, chapter 5 will answer the main research question before discussing the future study implications related to the topic explored here.
Chapter 4: Study Results

As it was highlighted above, the purpose of the following section is to present the results of the conducted study. For that, in the first sub-section, it will be described how the research identified the functions of Facebook as potential areas of Georgian queer activists’ empowerment. With the help of Facebook posts and interview data, we will discuss in detail components of empowerment in the context of queer activists. On the later stages, the study will focus on the activists’ perspective and perception of Facebook as a social media network that can empower them, but that also creates new challenges for queer community members and activists.

4.1. Which empowerment-related functions are identified through the Georgian queer activists’ use of Facebook?

4.1.1. Facebook Functions as Possible Empowerment Areas

As the theoretical inquiries made it explicit, context dependency and the influence of the settings on empowerment, both as a process and as an outcome, requires defining the components of empowerment particularly in the context of Georgian queer activists’ usage of Facebook (Zimmerman, 1995). For this, the functions of Facebook have been identified as components of possible empowerment, based on observing the respondents’ Facebook activities on their timeline and the information received while interviewing them. Content analysis of 100 Facebook posts and the textual analysis of the interviews showed 5 major Facebook functions that might empower queer activists at three levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal and community levels. Criteria of distinguishing the levels of analysis were whether the Facebook function was directed towards the queer activist by himself/herself (intrapersonal level), towards other individuals or groups of society (interpersonal level) or the queer community (community level).

On the intrapersonal level, Facebook serves an information-receiving function, and the received information affects on the activists’ identity. Intrapersonal empowerment in this study resonates to Zimmerman’s and Amichai-Hamburger et al.’s intrapersonal and personal components of empowerment of individuals that “refers to perceived control or beliefs about competence to influence decisions that affect one's life” and that determines reframing of one’s
identity (Zimmerman 2000, p.50 Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008). Herewith, it intersects with Hur’s self-determination and Petrič and Petrovčič’s knowledge building, i.e. cognitive components (Hur, 2006; Petrič and Petrovčič, 2014).

On the interpersonal level, Facebook has two primary functions for Georgian queer activists: 1) **self-expression and identity negotiation**, and 2) **resistance**. Interpersonal level of empowerment, in this case, accords to the Zimmerman’s interactional components as well as Amichai-Hamburger et al.’s interactional and Petrič and Petrovčič’s relational and expressive components of empowerment (Zimmerman 2000; Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008; Petrič and Petrovčič, 2014). On this level of empowerment, Zimmerman focuses on the increase of critical awareness of the surrounding with the help of interacting with it and recognizing when to involve into conflicts or when to avoid them (Zimmerman 2000). Meanwhile, Petrič and Petrovčič emphasize components that let the subjects of empowerment making connections with the like-minded individuals or groups and expressing themselves with the help of mediated communications (Petrič and Petrovčič, 2014).

For the community level, also two main functions of Facebook were identified with the help of theory-driven data analysis: 1) **community building and organization**, and 2) **community mobilization and participation**. In community building and organization we mean all the activities mediated through Facebook that queer activists do in order to enforce the queer community in Georgia. It refers to Petrič and Petrovčič’s sense of community and community organization, as well as Hur’s collective belonging and community building (Petrič and Petrovčič, 2014; Hur, 2006). Community organization is tightly connected to the actual online or offline mobilizing of “imagined gay community” to participate in community-related issues. Accordingly, this function of Facebook refers to Hur’s involvement in community, Amichai-Hamburger et al.’s citizenship level of empowerment regarding political participation and community participation according to Petrič and Petrovčič classification (Hur, 2006; Petrič and Petrovčič, 2014; Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008).
4.1 Levels and components of empowering Georgian queer activists

4.1.2. For what is the Facebook Functions Used by the Georgian Queer Activists?

After the short description of the theory-driven data analysis results, here the study will focus on the description of components of the empowerment of Georgian queer activists via Facebook. To begin with, it is important to stress that, in spite of taking Facebook posts as units of analysis, the functions discussed above could not be understood as firm, clear-cut categories that exclude the possibility of serving the different functions at the same time with the help of sharing a single Facebook post. As Zimmerman notes, usually the levels of individual and community empowerment analysis are intertwined (2000). The same might be applied to the subcategories or components of each level of the analysis. Concerning Georgian queer activists, receiving information might affect and intersect with self-expression, or the usage of Facebook for resistance sometimes can be seen as a part of a community building process.

Queer activists interviewed in the scope of this research unanimously indicated the excessive usage of Facebook on a daily basis, for private purposes, as well as for activism and other kinds of public activities. Most of them created an account on Facebook between 2007 and 2010, and since then, they are actively engaged in the social network, with occasional social media breaks. According to some of the activists, they were engaged on Facebook activities much more
intensely in the first period after creating the account, but some of them were more passive users of the network and became active members of the Facebook community later. Natia highlighted that there are occasions when she feels overwhelmed because of the intensity of the Facebook environment and thus, there are periods of time when she tries to distance herself from the social network. Meanwhile, other activists indicate about the extreme amount of time they spend on Facebook. “I use it all the time. I guess, I do not use it only if I sleep”, notes Emzo. Giorgi, who used Facebook much more intensely at the beginning of his relations with the social network, mentioned that nowadays, he remains more a consumer of information than a creator, and scrolling has become a habit for him. Some other participants, namely Koba and Ira, mentioned an experience of deleting the Facebook account but added that they kept re-activating their profiles after some time.

Despite the differences in their Facebook experiences, all the queer activists highlighted receiving information as one of the main functions Facebook serves them as ordinary users. Activists repeatedly mentioned that, for them, Facebook had substituted TV media as a primary source of receiving news and current information. “In fact, it [Facebook] has become the only source of information for me. I do not watch TV at all; I do not even have a TV set at home” Koba indicated. Facebook as a substitute and alternative of TV media has been mentioned by five other activists, including Beka, Ira, Levan, Nikolo and Natia. As Natia comments, today, when the speed of information has increased drastically, Facebook has gained an additional function – it helps people quickly become aware of current events. As she recalls, in June 2015, when there was a major flood in Tbilisi, user-generated content was more helpful regarding understanding what was going on, than TV broadcasters, who went on air rather late. Moreover, according to Beka, he uses a Facebook list, which consists of Facebook pages of media outlets, as well as individual editors, TV producers and other media personalities, so that in the morning, instead of searching current news, he checks the Facebook list.

Receiving information as a Facebook function is not a mere act of consumption of news or other forms of textual and audio-visual information. It also influenced their activist identity and political-ideological stances. According to Koba, observing other Facebook users helped him identify distinctions between ideologies and realize what it means to be a politically left- or right-inclined person. Ira also notes:
“It had a huge impact, at least, on my political ideology. One of the social groups that had an influence on me was the Georgian Young Greens. Generally speaking, leftist groups in Georgia, do not have access to informational networks, and Facebook is the only space where they can spread knowledge. Thus, I assume Facebook as an informational channel had a dramatic influence on my political stance.”

As the observation showed, along with the intrapersonal usage of Facebook for receiving and consuming information, queer activists also were engaged in the process of sharing Facebook posts ardently. Sharing information on Facebook, by its nature, can be seen as an intrapersonal act as it is directed towards other users or the virtual audience in general. On the intrapersonal level, one of the main functions of Facebook was self-expression and negotiations of identities, including one’s own social or gender identity.

Some activists stood out in terms of frequency of reflecting current societal issues. For example, Beka has been commenting very actively about various topics, including patriarchate, sexist advertisements, sex education, public health, women’s rights, problems of transgender community etc. Meanwhile, others, for instance, Nicolo, mostly have been reposting content, but without their commentary. Activists shared personal stories about experiencing coming out as a gay person in late 2000s Georgia (Giorgi) or details of daily life as a transgender person in today’s Georgia (Miranda). Some of the activists also were opening new topics for discussion, like Natia, who expressed her opinion in a lengthy Facebook post about women’s decision to stay anonymous while they participate in the process of outing sexual abusers at home, at work, or in other environments. On March 26, Levan published a post where they imposed that as a part of a LGBTQ movement in Georgia, they would never stand with the people who do not support gender quotas for women in the parliament. His post attracted tens of users to engage in the discussion, resulting in hundreds of comments and fierce debate.

Some activists reflected about their or others’ gender- and activist identity. Koba, commenting on one of the ongoing discussions among the queer activists, highlighted that he is a radical activist, so his forms of expression are radical, and he will never let other people control how he expresses himself. In another post, published by Levan on March 12, they stated:
“One important issue: Transgender women are not women born as men. Transgender women were born as women. The society has gendered them violently. The society has agreed upon the fact that the owner of the certain kind of body should be a man or a woman. This is exactly the violent gender system we are fighting against.”

When it comes to self-expression and negotiation of identities, one of the activists, Beka, highlighted that Facebook was an alternative, safer space to express opinions, as opposed to the offline world. He recalled one of the public meetings in the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, where he had to face negative attention directed towards him, and he almost felt that the attendants of the meeting were ready to attack him even physically, whereas, he added, Facebook lets one express oneself safely. Furthermore, Nukri and Miranda highlighted that Facebook gives them the opportunity to present themselves in front of the audience. Miranda claimed that the social networking site has helped her gain popularity, while Nukri noted that they love to talk to and be heard by their audience and Facebook gives them the opportunity for this.

Another function of Facebook for queer activists is to engage in acts of resistance. To be precise, based on the observation conducted on Georgian queer activists’ Facebook profiles, they use their social media accounts to confront the ideological and political opponents, both individuals and groups of society.

An illustration of confronting ideologically opposed individuals or groups was Levan’s abovementioned post, published on March 26. Levan, who shared the leftist position about the mandatory gender quotas for women in parliament, opposed liberal-right wing people in Georgia, who hold an antagonistic position about this issue. When it comes to confrontation with the opposing societal groups, another example can be seen in the comment section of Miranda’s post published on March 9. Under the Miranda’s public post, containing the video about the demonstration, held on March 8th, to demand the legal recognition of sex change in ID documents without having a sex reassignment surgery, several users used hate speech and transphobic comments towards her. In response to the hate comments, Miranda also attacked back verbally and defended her opinion. As she later confirmed, these kinds of comments are regularly made on her Facebook timeline, but she does not consider restricting the auditory for her posts (i.e. making her posts privately available to friends only).
Other examples of interactions with homo- and transphobic groups can be seen on the Facebook posts of several activists when they were ridiculing one of the leaders of a far-right group “March of Georgians” after it was revealed that he faked his illness to avoid being interrogated by the police. One of the activists also posted about banning one of the homophobic public pages by the Facebook administration after his and other activists’ participation in the process of reporting it. Another activist (Ira) also ‘trolled’ the participants of a homophobic event “No to Propaganda of Sodomy.” On the event page she posted:

“Hey friends, don’t forget to bring the rainbow flag with you. Let us prove to these prostitutes that we own the rainbow and no one can take it from us.”

Another form of acts of resistance seen on Georgian queer activists Facebook profiles was expressing dissatisfaction or criticism towards other individuals, societal groups or institutions. While criticizing, they were engaging in interaction with the representatives of the oppositional groups of society, as well as stressing their belonging to certain gender identity, sexual orientation, political or ideological group. For the observational period, the queer activists’ criticism was directed towards various actors, including government representatives, homophobic public figures and officials, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), business and religious institutions (mostly, the Georgian Orthodox Church) and clergy, media personalities, media outlets and journalists, other queer activists and internalized homophobe people. On March 27, for example, Giorgi posted:

“The biggest enemies of Georgian society today are the government of Georgia and all the politicians, fighting against progress purposely or doing nothing/being unable to do anything to stop the fascists fighting against their nation, regardless of their openly declared values.”

Activists not only criticized the structures of power, institutions or anti-gender groups, but also expressed dissatisfaction towards community organizations, other queer activists, queer community in general, or towards themselves. On March 12th, Ira posted a video of the ex-workers of Agara Factory (a sugar-producing factory in one of the small industrial towns in Georgia) demanding from the state to create conditions for the factory to continue functioning and let the former employees have their jobs back. On the example of the socially
underprivileged people, Ira claimed that in Georgia, even the activists are detached from the social reality and while people are begging for a minimum of income, instead of addressing real problems, “we are running with the colorful posters and tilting at windmills.” In the comment sections of some posts, among those, the posts where the activists were tagged, some community members expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of services delivered by the community organizations, as well as with the demonstration on 8th of March. Criticism towards the services, community organizations and individuals refers to another function Facebook serves to Georgian queer activists – community building.

Regarding community building, activists used Facebook to disseminate information about queer issues, including textual and audio-visual content produced by themselves, other individuals or media outlets. Queer activists attempted to increase their visibility and media presence by sharing media content citing or referring them as respondents or as central figures of the stories. Posts with educational purposes were also prominent concerning the historical persons affiliated with queer or feminist identity or academic and semi-academic articles critically discussing queer topics. Activists, especially those who are employees of the local community and human rights NGOs were actively spreading information about the services for the community members, trainings and workshops for queer people, job opportunities, and official statements produced by the organizations in response to ongoing political and social processes.

Along with disseminating information and discussions, expressing solidarity towards various societal groups, including drug users, women, socially underprivileged groups and workers was common among the queer activists. They ardently expressed solidarity towards gender- or sexuality groups towards which they do not ascribe themselves. For instance, Miranda, who identifies herself as a transgender woman, has been interviewed for the Facebook page “Women of Georgia,” where she talked about her history from early childhood up until the recent period. The personal story has been shared by other activists observed in the scope of this study. They were supporting her and expressing solidarity due to the difficulties that transgender women face in Georgia. They also used Facebook to express solidarity towards queer activists outside of Georgia (Natia, Ira, Beka, Miranda), to promote queer artists (Beka, Nicolo, Levan) or to call for support from the broader society towards the teenagers who identify themselves as LGBTQ individuals (Giorgi).
Another way of supporting fellow community members was to share the experiences related to physical spaces, as Beka did on March 2nd. In his post, Beka described in detail how one of the clubs in the second largest city of Georgia, Kutaisi, denied him the opportunity to organize a queer thematic event and how this rejection was motivated by the club administration’s precocious measures “not to irritate the neighbors” with the presence of queer persons in their venue. In the same post, he mentioned another space, namely one of the pizzerias in Tbilisi, where queer people had been discriminated. Under the post, a discussion of hundreds of comments erupted, and some of the queer individuals also expressed concerns about the mentioned places.

Moreover, queer activists also warned community members about the anticipated provocations orchestrated by local neo-nationalist organizations like “Georgian March” or “Georgian Power” (Eurasianet.org, 2017) to help existing campaigns to spread information among queer people and the broader public or to accumulate arguments about ongoing political, social or inner-group discussions. The function of those discussions was not only to express opinions in terms of strategic decisions but also to participate actually in group activities online and offline. Also, during the inner-community or inner-activist discussions, some of the respondents convinced other participants to avoid conflicts publicly or to give up confrontations in the online sphere.

Involvement in the discussions about the community-related topics refers to Petrič and Petrovčič’s definition of concept community organization as an “individuals’ involvement in strategic discussions and decisions regarding the vision of community in a wider socio-political environment, through which people find meaning and define themselves as community members” (2014, p.186).

Community organizing is linked to the process of physical or online mobilization and refers to actual events (both online or offline) where queer community members’ gathering is needed. This resonates with one of the components in Hur’s collective empowerment categorization (2006). To be precise, Hur describes community involvement as a crucial part of group empowerment and based on Boehm & Staples’ ideas, he defines it as “involvement or participation in community activities or events that may lead to affecting the power structure in communities” (ibid, p.534). Accordingly, activists created the space for discussions, where other queer users of Facebook/supporters of the community would participate to contribute the community activities.
In their Facebook posts queer activists were arguing not only about raising the community members’ political consciousness, the future of activism, different ideas related to queer emancipation, equality, strategies to choose allies, women’s emancipation and problematic societal issues, like sexual harassment or gender quotas, but also about the strategies to fight against homo- and transphobia. They were trying to organize queer individuals and supporters of the community, both, online and offline. Thus, organizing and mobilizing community members and supporters is another function of Facebook serving Georgian queer activists’ interests.

“For me as an activist, Facebook is a mobilizing tool. For example, when you need to gather people around some initiative, for some meeting or protest action …”, - Natia noted. Miranda, who was working as a community mobilizer and outreach officer at the Equality Movement, also mentioned Facebook as a tool to organize the community members when the organization had public or semi-closed events.

Koba’s post on March 7 can be considered as one example of online mobilization. After posting the fact that one of the homophobic Facebook pages had been banned by the company, in the comment section of Koba’s post, a discussion followed on the Facebook pages that should be the target for queer activists and individuals to report.

Activists also shared factual information about queer thematic events happening locally in Georgia. Topics of the events varied from political protests to entertainment, clubbing and community gatherings with educational purposes. Some of the posts with the intention to promote events also contained information about the services that community members could get from the organizers, for example, collecting condoms or other sexual health-related materials delivered during the occasion. The activists shared the event pages of the demonstrations or protests on March 8, the international women’s day. By sharing event pages, they were trying to increase community members’ participation in an offline activity. Facebook was used by Beka, for example, to disseminate information about Kiki, and by Levan and Emzo to spread a word about Horoom, two different series of queer nights in two different clubs of Tbilisi. The purpose of both of the events, according to Beka’s post, is to strengthen the queer community and create safe spaces for Georgian queer individuals to get together and enhance their sense of community.
Activists also contributed to the overall growth of visibility of queer events and activities and encouraged others to join them or express protest, for example, during the demonstration on March 8. Some of the activists (for instance, Beka) were using their Facebook accounts to participate in spreading information about the backlash between the supporters of the transgenders’ demand to obtain legal documents with the desired sex indicators without having surgery and a group of citizens who confronted them with the counter-demonstration. Another activist (Nukri) has used the Facebook live broadcasting feature to cover another event related to International Women’s Day – “Feminist-tour”, the march of women.

As the analysis in this section showed, the Georgian queer activists use several Facebook functions that might be anticipated as possible areas for their empowerment. First, Facebook was used by the activists to receive information about the local and international current news. On the interpersonal level, activists used Facebook for self-expression and identity negotiations, as well as for engagement in digital acts of resistance. Facebook was also used with the function of organizing and building the community, enhancing the community members’ involvement in community-related issues and for mobilizing and increasing the participation of the community members, both online and offline.

Defining the functions of Facebook that the Georgian queer activists use does not say much about their actual empowerment. Instead, these functions can be seen as a potential area where Georgian queer activists get empowered. Accordingly, based on these functions, the next section will conceptualize the role of this particular social media network regarding activists’ sense of becoming empowered and gain mastery over their individual- and community lives in the process of overcoming the power position of the oppressed societal group.

### 4.2. What is the Georgian queer activists’ self-perception of empowerment through the use of Facebook?

Empowerment as a process that changes individuals’ or communities’ power position regarding their decision-making capacities about their own lives also refers to the sense of liberation and belief of becoming more capable to make those changes happen (Laverack and Wallerstein,
Rappaport notes that “thinking about the definitions of empowerment suggests that we need to research the phenomena by studying how empowerment is actually experienced by those individual people who express the sense that they are, and are not, in control of their own lives...” (1987,p.135). Thus, empowerment, along with the actual changes in individuals’ and communities’ control over resources, is also a matter of senses. For that reason, to contemplate whether someone feels empowered or not, their self-perception of this alteration in her life should be examined. This section will take a closer look on the Georgian queer activists’ self-perceptions, i.e. whether they use Facebook successfully to alter their power position in society, claim more resources and whether Facebook enhances their capacities to have greater control on decision-making processes in relation to their lives. To that end, this section looks at activists’ perceptions, i.e. how they experience different functions of Facebook on the intrapersonal, interpersonal and community levels.

As it was shown in the previous section, on intrapersonal level, Georgian queer activists use Facebook as a primary mean of receiving news and current reports about socio-political issues in their surroundings, to familiarize themselves with the most current societal debates or recent trends. Also, Facebook is the primary informational channel for queer activists to be aware of the events happening locally, whether these events are organized to protest something, for educational or entertainment purposes, like queer parties, community gatherings or discussions about different topics. ”A couple of months ago, I deleted my account on Facebook for several weeks, and I was unable to receive any information, or I was receiving it very late”, recalls Nukri, commenting about the informational value of Facebook.

As some activists highlighted, the fact that Facebook has become their primary means of receiving information on a daily basis, it has affected on their identity, especially on their social identity, as they connect themselves to the outer world. Commenting on this aspect of Facebook usage, Giorgi mentioned:

“It has affected dramatically. In spite of a lot of negative side effects, one of the main reasons why I still use Facebook is the increased speed of receiving information. This process has become probably a billion times faster, and I do not mean only news. I also mean the opinions of other people, visual, audio and textual information that penetrates
my brain would not have the same intensity, velocity and quantity without the existence of Facebook.”

Levan also highlighted the role of Facebook in the process of their individual development. They believe that the major reason why they got interested in social activism in general and why they got an education as an activist was Facebook. They recalled that similarly with other queer adolescents in Georgia, they had to live in an extremely patriarchal, religiously moralistic and heteronormative surrounding and therefore, they did not have the luxury of having the circle of support.

“You need information to receive and consume to become critical towards the world you are living in and, of course, when you do not have access to this information, no one will stop you in the middle of the street and start educating you in critical theories…and Facebook gave me an opportunity to listen to these people, to get to know them, to have access to some resources, spaces and to become the person I am today”.

Not all activists perceive the use of Facebook as an important factor in their identity development. For instance, Nikolo noted that he was already an adult when he got a Facebook account and thus, it did not influence his beliefs or values or affected his personality in any way.

In the classification of homosexuality identification formations, Cass notes that one might have an identity of a homosexual on the individual level, but still hold the identity of heterosexual in public (1979). These two components of identity are separate, but are still related to each other (ibid). Concerning queer activists, Facebook usage might have an influence not only on the personal aspects of identity discussed above but also on the social/public aspects of it. The social dimension of identity resonates to the functions of Facebook for self-expression and identity negotiations, elaborated above. Regarding self-expression, the activists emphasized that Facebook serves as a platform for spreading their political views and opinions.

Giorgi mentioned that since he got involved in social activism, he has chosen a particular policy of adding friends. He was adding everyone without filtering the friend requests as he believed that those people might have been an audience while using Facebook as a political tribune.

“Among the main functions of Facebook, I should mention disseminating information and spreading your opinions, i.e. it is a very effective mean of spreading your own political
purposes,” Giorgi comments. Koba also mentioned the valuable work Facebook does to him as an activist to spread his opinions. From time to time, he publishes blog posts, and according to him, Facebook is the only means in Georgia to make his blog posts more popular and get more readers. As he summarized, for him, Facebook is a political space and, at the same time, an essential tool for political self-expression.

Koba also remembered how he used Facebook in order to come out publicly for the first time. After the backlash between LGBTQ supporters and homophobe crowd orchestrated by the Georgian Orthodox Church on May 17, 2013, he became more sensitive towards queer issues. Shortly after that event, one of the Georgian universities published a book with discriminatory content towards gay people, as well as towards women and disabled people. He recalled:

“I wrote an email to the rector of the university at that time, where I mentioned that I was gay, I was a student of that university, and thus, I was subsidizing that institution, and the book they published was derogatory for me. Later, I posted the text from the email on Facebook publicly. This was my first public coming out, and since then I decided to position myself openly as a gay person.”

Emzo also has experience of coming out publically on Facebook. In February 2018, he published a blog post “Mom, I am gay” on the website of the Equality Movement. According to him, after publishing, the blog post has become massively popular, mainly via Facebook shares and reposts by tens of media outlets. Giorgi, who also came out publically online, but on the personal blog, highlighted that identity revelation on Facebook feels safer and easier. Additionally, there is always the possibility to limit the audience on Facebook with whom you are going to share information about your gender identity or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, not all activists share the enthusiasm about coming outs on Facebook. Nukri noted that coming out on Facebook is quite different from the coming out in real life as the act of revelation identity is more efficient when people can hear this information during the offline interaction.

Besides self-expression and identity negotiations, Georgian queer activists mentioned Facebook as a place where the interaction with the ideologically opposing individuals or groups happen frequently. As the analysis of their Facebook profiles showed, they not only share posts about their ideological ‘enemies,’ but they also engage in discussions with them quite often. In the
posts, activists used irony and cynicism towards neo-nationalist groups, right-wing politicians, representatives of government or official structures. Meanwhile, in discussions, some of the activists engage quite seriously and with an aim to change the attitudes of homo- and transphobic persons. None of the activists expressed the trust that, with the help of these discussions, they can change the belief systems of homo/transphobic persons, but some of them are quite sure that in case of proper communication, they might help their ideological ‘enemies’ to start questioning their positions.

Nikolo is one of those activists who believe that Facebook is an efficient tool to make homophobic persons start questioning their positions. He noted:

“I would not say that it is possible to simply convert them to your position. Offline, real-world interaction is more efficient for that, as you can control emotions while speaking with them personally. But, at least you can implant a doubt [with the help of Facebook discussions]. I mean the people who can keep up the discussion with arguments and who do not start swearing as soon as there is no argument they can present. I meet such kind of people frequently. Even at this moment, I have an ongoing chat with two people. One of them was very aggressive, was swearing a lot, but later, it seemed like he got interested in a normal conversation.”

Beka highlighted that if you engage in discussion with anger, it might be even counterproductive. He noted that when homo/transphobic people start expressing their hatred towards queer persons online and all of a sudden you comment under the same posts as an openly queer person, they have a micro-shocks, and the discussion becomes more grounded into reality: “Of course I do not believe that I can change their opinions just by arguing, but the philosophy of disputing is that a person might not agree with you right on that moment, but you let them continue thinking.”

Nukri believes that there is a possibility to achieve some compromises with certain people, but when it comes to users radically antagonistic towards queer people, Facebook discussions are less efficient. Nevertheless, there is still a room for imposing critical questions in the scope of these disputations. This perception of Facebook discussions was shared by Levan also. According to them, it is more efficient to work with the “movable middle,” rather than with aggressive, radically homophobic individuals. On the other hand, Ira thinks that instead of directing activists’ energy towards neo-nationalistic groups like “Georgian March,” it is better to
work with the people who have belief in neo-liberal political views, those who hold significant visibility and social capital in Georgian society and so it is worth it to engage in discussions with them.

Similarly, Emzo does not see the point of holding discussions with the radically antagonistic groups, as they ignore all the rational arguments that might be brought up during the arguing. Instead, he believes, there is another tactic that works better in those kinds of discussions – to mock them and to banalize all their arguments that are motivated with violent intentions.

Acts of resistance do not refer only to the discussions with the homo/transphobic persons. Emzo also recalled how several queer activists managed to become members of the secret Facebook group operated by the neo-nationalists: “Some queer people are also members of the nationalistic group. They play a double game. With their help, several activists managed to sneak in their secret group to see their activities. We found there that nationalist people were collecting pictures of queer activists.”

Several activists also mentioned closed Facebook groups of queer people and their supporters where they get together to report the Facebook pages, individual users of the social network, or Facebook groups that disseminate hate speech and discriminatory or violent content towards marginalized groups of society, including queer persons.

Using Facebook for interpersonal interaction is just one corner of the full picture. As it was shown in the previous section, queer activists use Facebook for the interaction that is directed towards the other queer individuals or queer group entirely. Thus, Facebook might serve the purpose of community building and organizing queer people in several aspects. This particular social networking site lets queer activists disseminate information in two directions. First, they disseminate information for other queer people about services that community organization offers them, to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and its prevention, about queer related political issues, like the necessity of civil partnership for the same-sex couples, donation of blood by MSM people, etc. Secondly, dissemination of information might be directed to the broader society to increase the visibility of the group and queer-related issues.

As Koba notes, the efficiency of spreading information on Facebook is time-, content- and context-dependent. Meanwhile, Emzo highlights that there are certain techniques that he uses to
ensure the spread of information on a larger scale. Disseminating the information about PrEP can be named as an example of organizing the queer community with the help of Facebook. “PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV) is drugs against HIV that an HIV negative person can take to avoid contracting HIV” (RFSL, 2018). As some interviewed activists from the Equality Movement noted, after the organization started the special program for community members to receive PrEP without any expenses, they did not show much enthusiasm to participate in the program. Queers began to get interested in taking PrEP only after several activists posted about their own experience of participating in the program in the Facebook groups.

Levan believes that Facebook is a very effective tool for disseminating information, despite the drawbacks it might have. “When one asks me about the efficiency of spreading information via Facebook, I am thinking, if Facebook will disappear one day, what are we going to do? [...] It is a vital, necessary and efficient tool. With the minimum financial, human and energy costs, one can do so many things, reach so many people and in fact, you can be your own media…,” - Levan comments.

When it comes to the growth of group visibility, Beka assumes that Facebook has somewhat increased the visibility of queer people. Before Facebook, according to him, there were only two ways to increase the group visibility: private communications or mass media. Often, he noted, in the Georgian mass media, queer topics were covered in a way that a lot of community members were not happy about it. Ira also emphasized the decisive role of Facebook in the queer visibility in recent years. Despite the modest scales of the informational campaigns about queer issues, she believes that those campaigns still influenced on the overall process of empowering the queer community. She relates the empowering process and increase of visibility to each other and claims that the more empowered the community member is, the more open she becomes about her sexuality.

Giorgi holds a more optimistic view of Facebook’s role regarding increasing queer visibility:

“It truly had a huge influence. I mean thousands of people, more or less mobilized community members, who know each other and go to the same places… For example, in one of the Facebook groups, there are more than 1200 members, among whom 80%
would be queer... 8 years ago, there were only two or three persons who were publically out, and now we talk about a group of thousand people.”

What Giorgi means in increased inner group visibility could be referred to as a process of finding “similar others” (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2008). Commenting on the topic of visibility increase, Emzo is confident to state that TV media has not increased queer visibility at all, as they just started reporting about LGBTQ people ethically only recently. In contrast, Facebook was the medium that helped the community members become visible. Also, Facebook was a medium through which he managed to become friends with most of his fellow queers.

The process of finding similar others has a positive outcome not only on the individual level but also in terms of organizing the community. Nikolo discussed the fact that Facebook gives an opportunity to queer individuals to create fake profiles on Facebook. After establishing communications with the activists who are already out, people behind the fake profiles start accepting their own identity, and some of them even agree to participate in community meetings coordinated by the community organization.

When it comes to community organizations, most of the activists affiliated with them, or ones who have an experience of being employed by the LGBTQ community organizations, mentioned Facebook groups as one of the most helpful features of the social networking sites in activist work. Koba, who holds a position of the interim executive director of the LGBTQI Association Temida, highlighted that the association does not have an actual office, and therefore, has to operate within the online space. Besides emails, they use Facebook closed groups for organizational work. Koba noted:

“On the one hand, it might make some things more complicated, as Facebook groups are more oriented on posts, instead of voicemails or video conferencing that makes it difficult to transmit emotions along with the messages. But on another hand, communication via groups is simpler and quicker than via emails.”

Emzo shared a similar position about the simplicity of using Facebook groups for work and highlighted that almost all the co-workers in Equality Movement are active Facebook users and they check the notifications regularly, just like email. He added that Facebook groups also work as an archive of the organizational activities and this helps regional offices of the organization to
be always up-to-date about the work of the central office. Natia also mentioned that in the organization she worked until 2017, they even had different closed Facebook groups, one for the staff members, one for community members, and even though there are other platforms with the similar functions, Facebook groups are the easiest to manage and access.

Facebook groups are used for not only organizational functions and work. Queer activists rely on Facebook groups heavily when it comes to mobilizing the community members. Giorgi specifically mentioned the efficacy of this Facebook groups feature, which brings us to another dimension of Facebook functions for queer community empowerment – mobilization and participation. Before activists mobilize other members of the queer community, they use Facebook event pages to organize the many different kinds of online and offline activities. The observation on queer activists Facebook profiles made it clear that respondents were actively sharing information about different types of events, and thus, they were helping community members to get mobilized and attend the events.

In 2017, with the help of biggest techno club in Georgia, Bassiani, several activists started organizing the first series of queer events in the country - Horoom. According to Levan, Facebook was and is used as the primary source of identification of people who can attend the Horoom events. A similar experience was described by Beka, who is involved in organizing of Kiki, series of queer events in another techno club in Georgia Khidi. Beka concluded that organizers of events like Kiki or Horoom do not have an opportunity to announce events openly, for instance, to put the announcements in public places or to circulate advertisements in media. Accordingly, Facebook is the only option to deliver the information about private events to queer people.

Generally speaking, the mobilizing potential of Facebook was highly appreciated by the queer activists interviewed in the scope of this study. Ira highlighted: „It is very efficient and simple for mobilizing. I can say for sure, I have been using Facebook for 2 or 3 years already and it is much more efficient than the other tools.”

Similarly, other activists also mentioned the helpfulness of Facebook when they need to mobilize community members and supporters. According to Levan, Facebook is very convenient to identify individuals when a certain kind of mobilization is necessary.
Facebook was used for a mobilizing function not only for recreational events. Queer activists also plan demonstrations and protest actions with the help of Facebook events. Giorgi, who is also engaged in the White Noise Movement (WNM), which advocates liberalization of drug policy and drug decriminalization in Georgia, stated:

“We (WNM) have planned a demonstration where more than 10 000 participants with Facebook, or action on May 17 was also organized with Facebook… I am more than sure, if there were any guarantees on security in a year or two, tens of thousands of people will join our demonstrations on May 17, and I am sure that the main platform for organizing will be again Facebook.”

Interestingly, while discussing the capacities of Facebook to help queer activists in community members’ mobilization, Giorgi also mentioned the risks of counter productivity of using Facebook as a mobilizing tool. As he feared, clicking the “attending button” on Facebook might event kill the feeling of protest among the community members and online expression of dissatisfaction with might not be translated into offline protests. Giorgi was not the only respondent who had concerns about the usage of Facebook by queer activists. The next section of the study will take a closer look at the challenges that Georgian queer activists and the queer community might face while involving Facebook in queer activism.

4.3. “The other side of Facebook”

Other respondents shared concerns expressed by Giorgi about the possible drawbacks of relying too much on Facebook as a tool in activism for different reasons. During the netnographic observation, at least three possible challenges that queer activists might face during their usage of this particular social networking site have been identified. First, the existence of queer individuals’ static online profiles on Facebook increases their vulnerability to being reached by unwanted individuals or hostile groups easily and regularly. Second, conflicts among queer activists or community members accelerated with the usage of Facebook discussions, might harm the community’s integrity. Last but not least, Facebook as a platform for disseminating
information and a tool for community mobilization and organization can be used as successfully by the hate groups as queers might use it.

During the interviews, queer activists’ ambiguous feelings about the overall usage of Facebook were obvious. On the one hand, they appreciated the value of this particular social network for activist work, but on another hand, they were repeatedly mentioned the “other side” of the Facebook usage. Activists identified the main challenges mostly on the level of self-expression, resistance, community organization and community mobilization.

On the intrapersonal level, when it comes to receiving information via Facebook, there might be an issue of trustworthiness of that information. Activists emphasized the necessity of having a filter while consuming information, as Facebook does not serve as a producer of the information by itself and it only channels what other individuals or organizations disseminate. As Natia mentioned, one should distinguish which sources might be trusted, and in case of doubt, it is better to double check with other sources. Hence, using Facebook for informational purposes might require putting additional efforts by the users before the received information is perceived as trustworthy. Beka also mentioned that some of the community members expressed dissatisfaction about the “overdose” of queer thematic groups and the overabundance of information from different groups. On the intrapersonal level, other significant challenges have not been identified either during the observation on activists’ Facebook profiles or while interviewing them.

Regarding individual self-expression and personal identity negotiations, queer activists identified several problematic areas of using Facebook. First of all, expressing their opinions and engaging in public discussions where they position themselves as queer persons might end up with them becoming objects of enormous attention from hate groups that can always reach activists’ Facebook accounts and send threatening messages or express hatred in the comment section of the posts that activists share. Almost all of the activists interviewed in the scope of this study said that they have an experience of becoming targets of homo/transphobic persons.

Miranda, who identifies herself as a transgender woman, notes that Facebook has both positive and negative sides. If she can use Facebook successfully for spreading information and find
similar others, the same is the case for the homo/transphobic people. According to Miranda, they can also successfully get together and attack queer people online. She recalls:

“I was attacked in the street in January 2018. I took pictures of my beaten face and posted them on Facebook to spread the information. In one day, the post had more than 6 000 comments, and it was shared more than 1 500 times. The vast majority of the feedback was negative, from transphobic persons or hate groups, they were posting that I deserved even worse. Of course, I receive dozens of threatening and insulting messages, especially if I start becoming more active in public spaces.”

Koba noted that despite the positive results of increasing personal visibility of activists or community members, in the long run, there is a major problem of cyberbullying. As soon as someone decides to be publicly out, the neo-nationalist groups start organizing and attacking this person. Later, because of pressure from these people, community members need services like psychological aid, they become depressive, suicidal, and so on. It is also easier for the neo-nationalists to identify community members on Facebook and to attack verbally. According to Koba, the same happens to him from time to time. As soon as he becomes visible in mass media, he has to deal with the wave of hatred and the letters in his Facebook inbox from homophobic people, where they are threatening him with mutilation and murder. Koba, together with another activist, Beka, has tried to involve the police after receiving the critical amount of threats, but as both of the activists mentioned, the law-enforcement bodies did not do much to investigate who was behind the threats. Several activists also stressed the fact that, despite several features that restrict unknown people to communicate with accounts without mutual Facebook friends, the social networking site still allows people to reach any user easily.

Ira also identified the scales of cyberbullying as one of the main challenges on Facebook, along with the practices of outing queer persons. “The scale of cyberbullying and disseminating personal information is catastrophic. I do not even know if it is possible to protect ourselves against it. In this sense, Facebook certainly has a negative effect,” Ira comments.

Nukri also shares a similar position about the challenging part of using Facebook and adds that blackmailing, forced outing and hacking Facebook accounts is a serious problem in their surroundings. These kinds of practices existed even before Facebook, but now, with the help of
Facebook, there are “physical evidences” if someone decides to blackmail a queer person or in terms of outing. According to Nukri, this problem applies equally to random members of the queer community and experienced activists, since they usually do not have substantial information about digital security.

Beka recalled his experience of outing that happened during his student years in the university. As he said, his Facebook account was hacked and very intimate information from his private conversations was published. “That was a time when I lost my trust towards Facebook,” he added. However, Beka was not the only activist who had to deal with the practice of outing. According to Koba, as soon as he started positioning himself on Facebook as a queer person, someone from his relatives called his parents. Koba noted that this experience turned out to have positive outcomes, but at that moment, the process was very stressful.

According to the queer activists, when it comes to interaction with hate groups and homotransphobic persons, Facebook creates challenges not only regarding increased threats of being outed and receiving hate messages; Facebook also creates a fertile ground for hate groups to get organized and use Facebook features for their purposes.

According to Levan, neo-nationalist and neo-fascistic groups use Facebook successfully to get organized and recruit new members for their community, especially youngsters, whose value systems are not shaped yet and who are easy to be converted into a specific ideology. Levan mentioned that there are occasions when fake gay accounts add queer activists as friends, but behind those accounts, there are neo-nationalistic or fascistic groups instead of queer persons who cannot talk publicly about one’s sexuality:

“I found several suspicious Facebook accounts in my friend list. Only then I realized they might be from the fascistic groups and they could have access to such a bit amount of sensitive information, like my location, my check-ins, and so on.”

Moreover, Koba mentioned that, for the neo-fascist groups, Facebook is practically the only means to organize and mobilize their supporters. They are targeting, for example, bars owned by ethnically Turkish persons. They gather close to that places, broadcast live on Facebook and ask people to start gathering.
Giorgi shared a similar position, noting that queers are not the only ones who use social networking sites; everyone uses them, because of simplicity of usage. So, according to Giorgi, these groups use Facebook and they use it very successfully, especially when it comes to spreading disinformation and fake news. For Giorgi, Facebook is also perceived as an ideological weapon for homo/transphobic groups.

Nukri keeps observing those kinds of groups and thinks that Facebook helps them greatly to disseminate their agenda with the help of content they produce. Nukri sees positive side effect also of this process:

“Even though Facebook helps them to create content and they have better access to resources, I would still argue that it also decreased the level of physical aggression. Several years ago, they were regularly organizing to disrupt events related to queer topics. Nowadays, if there is a lecture or some other event, they come, they make several destructive comments, and then they leave. I guess Facebook made them lazy in the physical space.”

Natia highlighted that using Facebook by hate groups is highly problematic not only because of easier mobilization and organization but also due to higher access to precious information about queer activists. Besides, they are better organized in offline life, and their ideas are much more acceptable for the Georgian society than ideas about gay rights, so they enjoy more significant support from the general public.

Nationalistic and homophobic groups are not the only ones whose access to queer persons’ private information worries the activists. Ira does not feel safe on Facebook in general and tries to avoid sharing confidential information, including information about the community members, via Facebook. She noted that Facebook accounts are very easy to hack and suspects that the data is accessible for that security services of the country.

Nukri shares the same concerns about privacy and claims that it is silly to believe that information shared within Facebook, no matter where it happens publicly, in private messages or closed groups, will not leave the boundaries of the social networking site. They criticize the activists’ lack of ability to assess properly security issues Facebook creates and adds that the “Big Brother is always watching you.”
On the response to the mobilization of neo-nationalist and queer hater groups through Facebook, queer activists and their supporters try to report their social media accounts, but as activists noted, Facebook does not react on reports in time. Beka highlighted that he feels very angry with Facebook because of that. As he reports, using hate speech is more than ordinary on neo-nationalists’ Facebook pages, and that does not comply with the standard of free speech. He blames Facebook since in most cases Facebook does not react at all to the reports and does not follow the standard that it claims to have.

Levan remembered occasions when haters posted their picture with the caption that was calling people to stone and kill them. Levan claimed that it was necessary to ask hundreds of Facebook friends to report the picture. Otherwise, the administration of Facebook was not reacting on their report.

“I guess they do not even have special staff members [in Facebook] who would work for reviewing Georgian cases. I would really appreciate if Facebook had more sensitivity and better policy in this sense.”

Nikolo also recalled several occasions when he and his friends reported Facebook posts with fascistic content or posts encouraging people towards violence, but the administration of the company got back to them with the response that those posts did not contain any problematic information. He worries that even though activists need to mobilize enormous resources and patience to deal with the hate content, Facebook needs at least two months to respond to their reports and delete posts or ban the pages.

During the observational period, the Georgian queer activists and community members were also engaging in interaction with each other on their Facebook timelines. At least in two cases, queer activists were engaged in conflict with each other. Once the reason for the conflict was Levan’s post:

”As a member of the social movement, I will not stand next to people, who with one hand work for LGBT rights but with another hand work hard for anti-feminist purposes, think that social-economic oppression is “a choice” and support this system. Feminism, economic justice and many other issues are queer issues.”
Levan’s post attracted hundreds of comments by tens of Facebook users, including other queer activists, community members and supporters. During the discussion, several participants engaged in a severe debate and that went beyond the topic of the discussion and became a more personal confrontation, which included insulting each other.

In another case, Beka and Koba criticized one of the Georgian queer activists, who was not part of this study, for making nationalist and inappropriate comments about Russian children who died in a fire on March 26 (BBC News, 2018). In response, the activist accused Beka and Koba in revealing beneficiaries’ personal information related to their health. Several days after, Koba posted on his Facebook profile the response to the accusations and Koba’s post was shared by Beka also. Eventually, the queer community members, activists and supporters engaged in conflict with each other, some of them supporting Koba and Beka, and others backing the queer activist mentioned above. Soon after the inner group conflict erupted on Facebook, several homophobic websites and Facebook pages shared the screenshots of the discussions between the queer activists.

Two cases summarized above represent another challenge on the level of community organization that Georgian queer activists have faced while using Facebook in their activist work. Queer community members or activists engage in discussions, which sometimes go farther than just a discussion about queer issues and become more like personal conflicts. Giorgi indicated that Facebook lets activists slip on ice. They might not realize the fact that when they engage in conflict under Facebook posts, there might be just several discussants, but hundreds of people might read the whole discussion. Commenting about the inner group confrontations, Nikolo noted:

“I assume these kinds of fights are very negative, they harm the community and the participants should think that it is possible to solve the certain problems in private communication, instead of slinging mud at each other.”

In the interview, Levan one of the participants of these internal community discussions admitted that their post might have been an obstacle for the rightist community members as Levan’s position in Equality Movement might determine that their personal opinion might be affiliated to the whole organization. According to Levan, it is always better to figure out issues imposed in
their post without publicly making controversial statements, but Facebook by itself creates a space where it is very easy to be aggressive. Levan noted:

“I am not sure what the reason is, but on Facebook, it is easier to be cynical, aggressive. If this discussion would happen in an offline space, where all of us would sit together and talk, maybe there would be less fight.”

Commenting on this issue, Beka claimed that these kinds of conflicts are natural and there is nothing dramatic when activists confront each other. He even assumes such situations as a process of crystallization of the group and the lustration of the activists’ values. Ideological confrontations, debates and even cynic attitudes are just a form of self-expression for him. At the same time, he admitted that the accusations that he received might prevent him in his professional activities, as some beneficiaries might start questioning his professionalism and decide not to use the services offered by the organization in which he works.

Damaging of professional reputation was the primary concern for Koba also when he reflected on the confrontation between him and another queer activist. He also highlighted that conflicts like that might be damaging to the community members, as they can raise questions concerning trusting him as a professional. Nevertheless, Koba also believes that in the process of confrontations, it is possible to distinguish persons with whom it is possible to continue working on queer issues and those who might be ideologically too far from one’s values.

Similarly, Nukri holds a somewhat ambiguous opinion about the presentation of the internal community discussions on Facebook. On the one hand, they think, there is a threat of radicalization of confronting activists, but on another hand, such forms of communication might encourage the process of establishing more sub-groups, and it might help activists to identify their ideological stances.

Natia claimed that communication on Facebook is different from offline interaction and that Facebook creates difficulties in the queer community that is very diverse by nature. Often, discussions transform into personal conflicts, and that makes it impossible to work together. She also adds that on the one hand, Facebook helps you mobilize the particular group of society, but on the other hand, because of Facebook, mobilization might never happen. Natia’s concerns resonate with Giorgi’s worries about “slacktivism” that prevents community members to
mobilize in the offline world (Morozov, 2012). Emzo recalled the case when two queer activists were attacked in a public space in 2017. After a couple of days, when activists organized a protest action in front of a local court, only 10 supporters showed up on the protest, while hundreds of Facebook users had clicked on the “going” (i.e. attending) button at the event page.

On the level of activists’ participation and community mobilization, Nukri also stressed the critical necessity of improved digital literacy skills for queer activists. They noted:

“We, the activists, do not have the consciousness and knowledge to handle security and safety issues. Such consciousness does not exist even in case of organizations. I believe it is a severe challenge that has been there already for years and nobody has done anything about it yet.”
Chapter 5: Discussion

Empowerment in community psychology, as well as in other disciplines, is a multi-dimensional, multi-level and highly context-dependent notion (Zimmerman, 1995; Hur, 2006). Thus, to answer the main research question of the study and see how Georgian queer activists get empowered through their use of Facebook, it is necessary first to identify the functions of this particular social networking site as used by the research participants. Later, based on the perceptions of the queer activists, the study discusses the empowering effects of Facebook. Finally, the study concentrates on the challenges that queer activists face because of using Facebook.

Based on the analysis of the Facebook posts shared by the study participants and the interviews conducted with them, Georgian queer activists use different Facebook functions for intrapersonal, interpersonal and community empowerment. While intrapersonal empowerment mostly focuses on increasing the informational awareness of the activists by themselves, interpersonal level of empowerment refers to the acts of self-expression and resistance against the different subjects or social entities that hold a higher power position in social hierarchy. According to queer activists, they use Facebook successfully to express their opinions about the social and political issues, negotiating their activist or queer identity, to criticize power structures and to confront ideologically oppositional or hostile groups of the society. As it seems, on the community level, queer activists use Facebook to organize and build the community as well as to mobilize the community members and supporters and enhance their participation in queer related activities.

Interviews with the Georgian queer activists confirmed Petrič and Petrovčič’s formulation that “the online platforms themselves do not automatically lead to empowerment” (2014, p.194) and extensive usage of Facebook does not come without a price. As the participants discussed the efficiency of the social network, they were also mentioning the “other” side of Facebook. Using Facebook as a queer activist seems problematic for several reasons:

a) Increased vulnerability of queer persons, due to having static social media accounts that makes them constantly reachable for the homo/transphobic individuals and groups to attack them verbally or obtain information about them;
b) Increased threats of cyberbullying and “outing” of queer community members who hide their sexual orientation or gender identity. Queer activists also discussed the lack of digital literacy among the queer community members, as well as among the queer activists and even the representatives of NGOs, especially when it comes to digital security or avoiding the online harm;

c) “Successful” usage of Facebook by neo-nationalistic, neo-fascistic and anti-feminist groups and inefficient work of the social network administration regarding preventing hate speech and violent content in the Georgian language;

d) According to the queer activists, Facebook is a space where it is relatively easy to be cynical or aggressive, and this increases the probability of conflict situations among the queer activists or other community members. Some activists did not see the last concern as dramatic as the others. However, they were still admitting that the transparency of such conflicts might harm random community members or hostile groups might use publicly displayed information against the queer community and activists; and last but not least,

e) Several activists expressed concerns about Facebook making people lazy to protest or giving them wrong perception of engaging in the act of resistance just through clicking the “going” button at the demonstration event pages.

As the participants of this study demonstrated, queer activists in Georgia use Facebook for their activist work successfully, but the successful usage has limits, and the empowerment of the activists is compromised. On the one hand, Facebook gave an essential tool for self-expression, resistance, community building and mobilization to queer activists. On another hand, it has also empowered the groups that exist in the opposition of queers, increased community members’ vulnerability regarding privacy issues and cyberbullying and ameliorated the false sense of protesting with the help of “slacktivism”.

As mentioned earlier, this study intended to explore the sense of empowerment that certain Georgian queer activists achieve through use of social networking site Facebook. Accordingly, this study does not depict the picture that can be generalized to all individuals engaged in queer resistance. Also, the study does not have the ambition to make claims about the actual
empowerment of queer individuals through their usage of Facebook. As some researchers note critically, one of the problems of studying empowerment is the distance that might exist between the feeling of being empowered and actual empowered conditions in the sense of gaining resources needed for controlling one’s own life. Accordingly, further research is needed to see how this particular social media affects the quality of the life of queer individuals in the society in which their social acceptance is still contested.
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