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Degree Report

Towards Another Closet? The Social Integration-related Experiences of
Georgian LGBTQ+ Asylum Seekers in Berlin, Germany.

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Author: Tamazi Sozashvili
Supervisor: Anna Ryan Bengtsson

Abstract

Title: Towards Another Closet?! The Social Integration-related Experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ Asylum Seekers in Berlin, Germany.

Author: Tamazi Sozashvili

Georgia is among the top 10 nationalities who seek asylum in the EU. Despite not existing the official statistics, LGBTQ+ individuals, too, flee from Georgia due to persecution and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Despite expectations of liberation in European countries, they face intersecting discrimination and maltreatment both as LGBTQ+ individuals and as refugees, which impede their integration.

This qualitative research aims to investigate the social integration-related challenges LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face in the European Union and explore their strategies for dealing with them. To reach this goal, I chose a case of the Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin, Germany, and conducted eight semi-structured interviews to understand their interaction experiences with local society, state institutions, and fellow Georgians in Berlin. Then I performed a thematic analysis and applied intersectional lenses and an integration framework's social connections domain to explore the phenomena deeply.

This study shows that the social integration experiences of Georgian queer asylum seekers go beyond simplistic binary categorization and are instead characterized by complexity and diversity contingent upon their multifaceted intersecting identities. They face discrimination and maltreatment based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, and refugee status while interacting with state institutions, local society, and ethnic Georgians. Furthermore, the results also show examples of positive experiences of support and solidarity across these domains. However, trans* asylum seekers appear to face the most challenging circumstances.

Overall, the study concludes that the social integration experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are ambivalent and ambiguous, contingent upon their sexual orientation, gender identity, and refugee status. Additionally, religion, class, and other variables seem to play a crucial role too. Furthermore, the study illustrated strong interconnection between different domains of the integration framework.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ asylum seekers; Social Integration; Intersectionality; Georgia; European Union.

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The List of Abbreviations

CRRC Georgia	The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, Georgia
EU	The European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
ILGA EUROPE	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, Europe
LAF	State Office for Refugee Affairs Berlin
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer with a "+" sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities.
NDI Georgia	National Democratic Institute, Georgia
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
UNHCR	The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USA	The United States of America

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
The List of Abbreviations	iii
1 Introduction and Background	1
1.1 Context of Georgia.....	3
1.2 Context of Germany and Berlin	3
1.3 Research Problem.....	5
1.4 Purpose/Aim.....	8
1.5 Research Questions	8
1.6 Study Outline.....	9
2 Literature Review	9
2.1 Social Integration of Queer Asylum Seekers	10
3 Theoretical/Analytical Considerations	16
3.1 Social Connections.....	16
3.1.1 Social Bridges	17
3.1.2 Social Bonds	17
3.1.3 Social Links	18
3.2 Intersectionality.....	18
4 Methodology.....	20
4.1 Research Design.....	21
4.2 Research Method.....	22
4.3 Sampling.....	22
4.4 Interviews.....	25
4.1 Participant Profiles	26
4.2 Thematic Analysis.....	26

4.3	Reliability and Validity	28
4.4	Ethical Considerations.....	32
5	Analysis and Discussion.....	36
5.1	A first moment of queer joy	37
5.2	Social Links.....	39
5.2.1	Discrimination and mistreatment based on refugeeness.....	39
5.2.2	Discrimination and mistreatment based on gender identity.....	41
5.2.3	Adding fuel to the fire: non-queer Georgian asylum seekers at LAF.....	43
5.2.4	“It depends on how you present yourself.”	43
5.2.5	“I’m not ungrateful, though.”	45
5.3	Social Bonding	46
5.3.1	“Georgian will always remain Georgian.”	46
5.3.2	The power of being among similar others until disputes emerge.....	49
5.3.3	Not-so-safe space.....	50
5.3.4	Community within the community.....	53
5.3.5	Dreaming of an apartment	54
5.4	The importance of the language.....	56
5.5	Social Bridges / Ambiguous Encounters.....	58
5.5.1	Not-so-safe public sphere.....	58
5.5.2	Homophobic immigrants.....	60
5.5.3	Discrimination based on refugeeness – towards another closet?!	61
5.5.4	An effect of being nice.....	64
6	Strategies to Handle the Situation.....	65
6.1	Reliance.....	66
6.2	Escape.....	68
7	Conclusion.....	70

7.1	Summary	73
7.2	Limitations	74
8	References	76
9	Appendixes	81
9.1	Appendix 1: An informed consent form [EN/GE]	81
9.2	Appendix 2: An interview guide [EN/GE].....	83
9.3	Appendix 3: Map of the themes	86

1 Introduction and Background

Migration has been a global issue. There were 32.5 million refugees worldwide, of which more than 20%¹ were living in the EU by the middle of 2022 (UNHCR, 2022; European Commission, 2023). An increasing number of Georgians have been applying for asylum in the EU in recent years. The EU registered more than 25,000 first-time asylum applications from Georgia in 2022, which makes the country among the top 10 nationalities² who seek asylum in the EU (European Commission, 2023). In addition, Georgians are among the top five nationalities which applied for asylum in the EU in 2022 (EUAA, 2022). Moreover, they are ranked in third place (2,9%) among the nationalities who enter the borders of the EU legally due to the visa-free regime since 2017 (European Commission, 2023). There are different reasons for migration, such as seeking a better socio-economic situation, employment, education, or looking for safety. Unfortunately, no separate data shows the top reasons for asylum-seeking from Georgia, particularly concerning sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

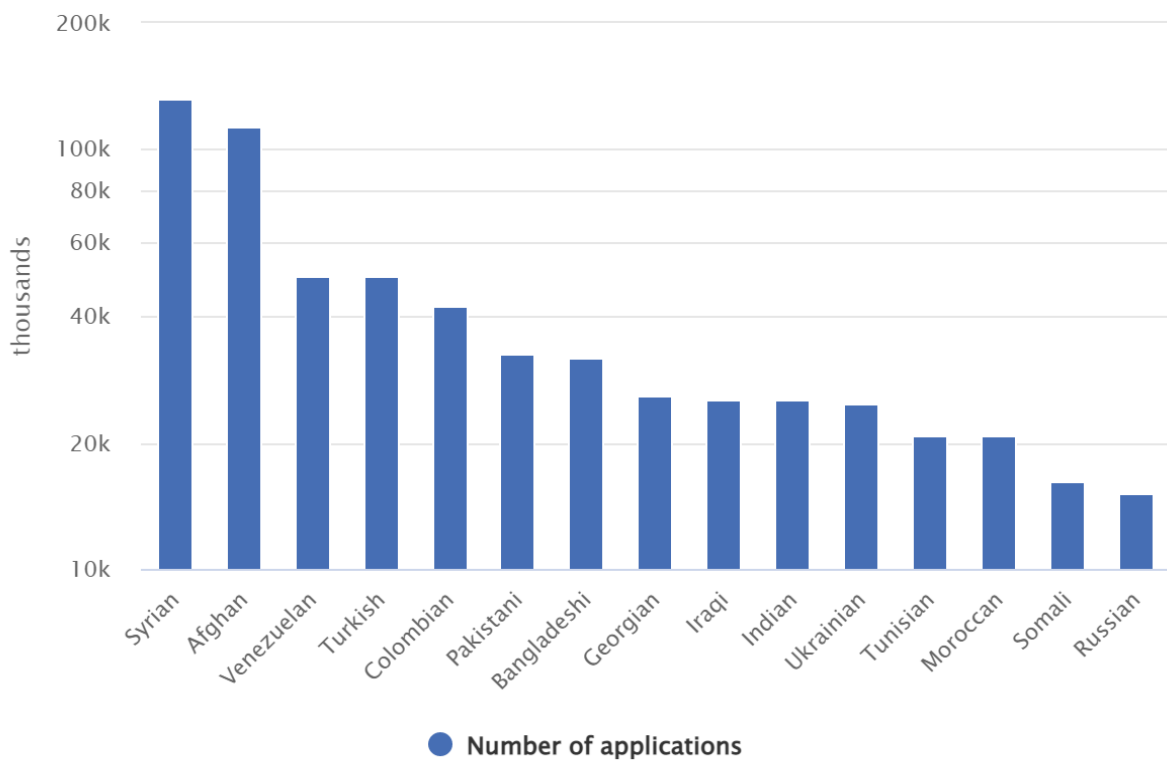
The stories of asylum seekers are diverse and challenging. Studies show that asylum seekers experience multiple inequalities (Chossière, 2021; Held, 2022; Andrade et al., 2020). While research on migration and asylum experiences has become popular, I could not access any official knowledge about the experiences of Georgian asylum seekers. People flee their country of origin to seek protection and safety, but most applications are rejected. The recognition rate of asylum applicants from Georgia between December 2020 and December 2022 was only 4%, while 15328 cases have been still pending (EUAA, 2022). The country is marked safe by the majority of the EU states, which creates solid ground for rejecting the asylum applications of Georgian citizens.

¹ Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the share of the world's refugees in the EU was less than 10% by the end of 2021.

² See Diagram 1, which shows Georgia among the top 15 nationalities seeking asylum in the EU.

As a queer³ activist with more than five years of extensive experience in advocacy and campaigning for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*⁴ and Queer (LGBTQ+) rights in Georgia, I have observed a rising number of LGBTQ+ community members in Georgia who have been immigrating to the EU countries. According to the European Commission (2023), Germany is the most popular destination for asylum seekers. Although there are no official statistics on the most popular destination for the Georgian LGBTQ+ community members, Germany and Belgium have been the most chosen countries, as per my observation.

Diagram 1: *Top 15 nationalities of first-time asylum applicants in the EU in 2022. Source: Eurostat/European Commission, 2023*



³ Queer is often used as an umbrella term to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities.

⁴ Transgender or Trans* is an umbrella term that includes those people who have a gender identity that is different from the gender assigned at birth and those people who wish to portray their gender identity in a different way to the gender assigned at birth. This includes, among many others, transsexual and transgender people, transvestites, cross-dressers, no gender, multigender, genderqueer people, intersex, and gender variant people who relate to or identify as any of the above

1.1 Context of Georgia

LGBTQ+ individuals leave Georgia and seek asylum in the EU because of the hostile environment in their country of origin. Several international human rights organizations have written about the challenging social and political situation for the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia. For instance, according to Rainbow Europe Map and Index 2023, Georgia is ranked 35th with 25% of the overall score among 49 European countries (ILGA EUROPE, 2023a). This fact provides insight into the challenging environment for the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia.

Furthermore, activists and community members faced threats and violence in attempts to organize Pride Events in the capital of Tbilisi in 2021 (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Amnesty International issued a statement in response to the state's lack of responsibility in ensuring the safety of the LGBTQ+ community and organizers of the Tbilisi Pride events (Amnesty International, 2021). The rights of the trans* community are violated. There is no fair and transparent procedure for legal gender recognition for trans* persons (ILGA EUROPE, 2022). Furthermore, public opinion on the LGBTQ+ community remains negative, with only 27% considering LGBTQ+ rights important (NDI Georgia and CRRC Georgia, 2019).

1.2 Context of Germany and Berlin

In contrast, Germany is marked as one of the most progressive countries in terms of protecting the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. The country takes 15th place in the Rainbow Europe Map and Index 2022, with an overall score of 55% for achieving LGBTI rights (ILGA EUROPE, 2023b). German law protects LGBTQ+ persons against employment, education, health discrimination, and so forth. In addition, it provides legal gender recognition for trans* people, marriage equality for same-sex couples, alongside child adoption rights. Furthermore, the right to freedom of assembly is guaranteed, and LGBTQ+ groups and organizations organize public events, such as Pride marches, without any obstacles. Remarkably, since 1992 German law has defined persecution based on sexual orientation and gender identity as legal grounds for seeking asylum for foreign nationals (ibid).

Although, lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people largely depend on multiple factors rather than simply adopted laws. The experiences vary depending on citizenship status, skin color, place

of residence, (dis)ability, and many other characteristics. It is suggested that lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people are defined through the intersection of homo/transphobia and other types of discrimination (Stonewall, 2018). Speaking of the significance of the place of residence, scholars argue that different cities provide different opportunities to asylum seekers, depending on the degree to which the receiving society is open and accepting (Phillimore, 2020). Therefore, focusing on a specific geographic area is necessary. That is why I have briefly overviewed the context in which LGBTQ+ people navigate in Berlin. I tried to find scholarly articles in relation to this topic; however, it was difficult to access relevant ones. Therefore, I decided to utilize several articles provided by online media outlets that capture Berlin's past and present queer perspectives. Berlin has a long history of queer life, starting from the late 1880s (The Globalist, 2015). During this time, the very first gay magazine was founded, followed by different initiatives, such as queer bars and other socializing spaces, queer thematic books, and forth, which led to the development of the liberation movement. Although, the Nazi regime destroyed almost all the progress which was made in this field. (Deutsche Welle and McKay, 2004). Despite a mixed past, modern Berlin, with its diversity, provides a variety of opportunities for the LGBTQ+ community, such as bars, clubs, art galleries, exhibitions, and countless socio-cultural points and events, which creates freedom to express themselves and possibilities of development alongside laws and policies ensuring their protection and equal treatment. That is why the city attracts thousands of queer people from across the world (Berlin Tourismus & Kongress, n.d.).

The legal, policy, social, and cultural context can explain why LGBTQ+ people tend to arrive in Berlin to seek asylum. However, Chossière (2021), in line with other queer migration scholars, argues that migration experience only modifies the form of oppression and does not eradicate it for the queer community. A recent study shows that queer asylum⁵ seekers experience various forms of oppression in their host countries (Andrade et al., 2020). They face discrimination based on their sexual orientation not only within the refugee community but in a receiving society, too, alongside exclusion from the local queer community based on their refugee status (ibid). In order to set the ground and enable the discussion of asylum seekers'

⁵ Queer and LGBTQ+ carry the same meaning in this thesis and are used interchangeably.

integration, in the next section, I provide background on the concept of integration, which is followed by the definition of the research problem area.

1.3 Research Problem

First, I briefly checked how the EU defines integration because the research focuses on this geographical area; then, I moved on to the scholarly understanding of the topic. The European Union (n.d.), based on the Zaragoza declaration⁶, sets out different indicators for monitoring migrant integration and inclusion, namely: employment, education, health, social inclusion, and active citizenship. However, this is a relatively narrow perception of integration compared to what contemporary scholars write about it.

Ager and Strang (2008) argue that integration has different meanings for various scholars. They referred to a couple of scholars (Robinson, 1998 and Castles et al., 2001) to demonstrate the lack of collective agreement on the meaning of integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Some scholars claim that while integration is a widely used concept in the field, most researchers use it with different meanings. There seems to be no potential for a universal definition due to the ongoing arguments (ibid). In addition, Feinstein et al. (2022) follow the same narrative and stress that integration is broadly challenged amongst the interested parties. They reference several scholars (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Wijbrandi, 1986; Berry, 1992) to show this difference clearly. Some authors understand integration as the cohabitation of asylum seekers and host communities without major conflicts; others argue that it represents the opposite process of marginalization in various aspects of life. Marginalization is understood as providing unequal resources and opportunities to participate in social, economic, cultural, and other processes that drive society. Overall, the authors claim that integration is not unidimensional but a multidimensional process. However, most of the scholars' and policy makers' primary understanding of integration was unidimensional, whereas it was asylum seekers' pure responsibility to integrate without any responsibility of host communities (ibid).

The authors argue that integration is a complex phenomenon requiring study from many different disciplines (Castles et al. 2002). They claim that grassroots organizations and activists

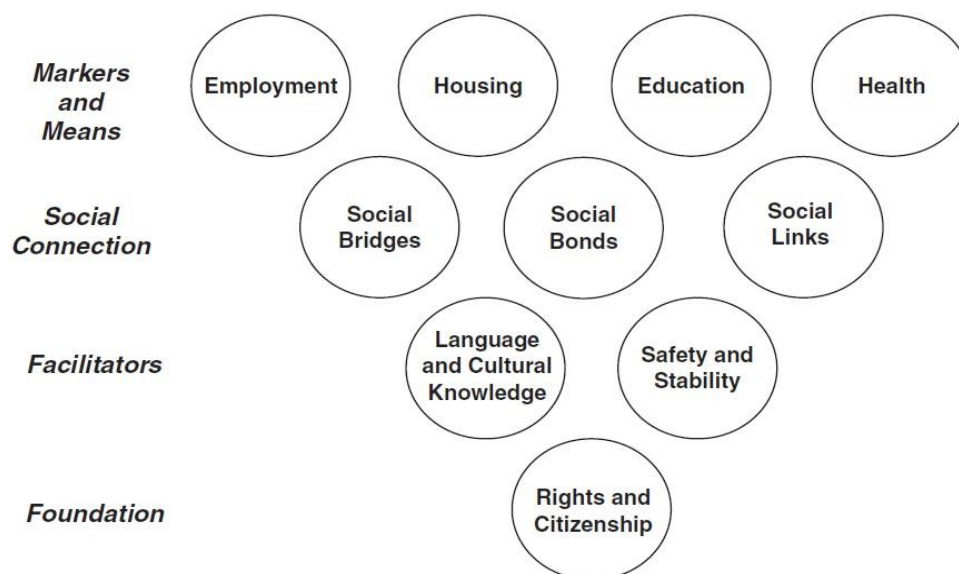
⁶ adopted in 2010 by the European Ministerial Conference on Integration.

in the field are against the term integration while still using them due to the pressure from donor organizations and policymakers. In addition, some scholars discuss inclusion and participation as alternative terms for integration (ibid). However, evidence proves that the most commonly used term remains integration. Castles et al. (2002) further stress that integration has multiple angles and may take place disproportionately in different aspects of life. For example, asylum seekers or refugees may be integrated into the labor market but excluded from the social sphere. While speaking different terms of and for understanding integration, most scholars agree that whether inclusion or participation, it takes place at various levels. I addressed this issue in the next section while discussing the popular integration framework.

Ager and Strang (2004) developed *Indicators of Integration Framework* for refugees (See *Figure 1*). According to this framework, ten policy indicators are organized under four domains: foundation, facilitators, social connections, and means and markers. There is a hierarchy of indicators, where the foundation is placed on the lowest level, and means and markers are on top. In addition, there are different indicators under each domain. In the case of social connections, three different indicators are provided to evaluate the social integration of asylum seekers: social bridges, social bonds, and social links.

Figure 1

A Conceptual Framework Defining Core Domains of Integration



There is a wide range of research on the integration of refugees. However, most research focuses on particular integration aspects while missing the comprehensive approach. There is occasional research on the integration of queer asylum claimants⁷ in the EU, but only a limited number of them focus on the social aspect of it. Moreover, there is neither such data for Georgian asylum seekers nor specifically for Georgian queer asylum seekers. Hence, I decided to focus on social connections because this framework precisely classifies different integration aspects, allowing me to focus on the most relevant ones for my research goals. I was particularly interested in the experiences of exclusion and discrimination of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. In addition, I observed whether and how their experiences of oppression are reshaped in the asylum-seeking process.

Moreover, I chose to utilize the *Social Connections* domain because establishing and developing social interactions is of the utmost importance for people who migrated forcibly (Ager and Strang, 2008). According to Phillimore and Goodson (2008), social connection is the critical aspect for facilitating integration on a local level. While most of the literature focuses on refugees, recently, scholars have started highlighting the importance of the involvement of both sides: refugees and the receiving society, to ensure the integration process to the maximum extent (ibid). This aligned with one of the indicators set out by the European Union, namely social inclusion. However, utilizing Ager and Strang's (2004) integration framework was more suitable for my research purpose, as it provides three different policy indicators of social connections, which I deployed to investigate closely in connection with the experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin.

Overall, I chose the social aspect for several reasons; first, it covers the issues of exclusion and discrimination, which are relevant to both human rights and social work; second, it allowed me to shed light on crucial social problems such as homo/transphobia and hatred related to refugeeness in everyday life of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

⁷ Asylum claimants and asylum seekers are used interchangeably in this thesis and carry the same meaning.

1.4 Purpose/Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate social integration-related challenges LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face in the European Union and explore the strategies to deal with them. To achieve my goal, I chose a case of the Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin, Germany.

I decided to focus on Berlin because I have a long history of living and working voluntarily with LGBTQ+ refugees there, including the fact that I conducted my university placement at an LGBTQ+ refugee shelter there in 2022. In addition, I decided to choose the case of Georgian queer asylum seekers for several reasons. To begin with, I have been advocating for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community for more than five years in Georgia, and this study is the continuation of that process. Moreover, this study will contribute to the knowledge production on the experiences of queer asylum claimants in the EU as well as specifically Georgian queer asylum seekers' social integration-related challenges in Berlin, Germany. The later gains particular significance because there is no such data yet.

1.5 Research Questions

Research questions are usually derived from the research areas that interest the researchers (Bryman, 2016). This can be related to several reasons, such as personal experience or interest, a particular theory that a researcher wants to test, a social problem, gaps in the literature, new societal developments, and so forth. (ibid). My motivation derives from the combination of several of them. First, the research area is related to an actual social problem; secondly, there is a knowledge gap in the research literature on this topic. Consequently, I have formulated my research questions as follows:

1. How do Georgian queer asylum seekers experience social integration within the Georgian migrant community in Berlin?
2. How do Georgian queer asylum seekers experience social integration within the local society in Berlin?
3. How do Georgian queer asylum seekers experience social integration in connection with state institutions?

4. How do Georgian queer asylum seekers deal with the social integration-related challenges in the asylum-seeking process in Berlin?

Bryman (2016) provides several criteria for the evaluation of research questions. The author claims that the research questions should be clear and understandable; they should be neither too broad nor too narrow and have the potential to contribute to new knowledge production (ibid). I arrived at these research questions after a lengthy process of going back and forth between literature, theory, and methods.

1.6 Study Outline

To achieve my goal, I have developed several chapters that guide the reader through. In the following part of this report, I provide a review of the most relevant literature that explores the relevant studies in the field of social integration of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Europe. Then, theoretical considerations are discussed, and their application is explained. After that, the methodology is presented, and the procedures of data collection and analysis are explained. Moreover, ethical considerations are discussed and addressed upon moving to the analysis and discussion. The results, analysis, and discussion are introduced through themes and sub-themes. In addition, the theme of strategies of the target group for dealing with the challenges is inserted and discussed into two sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes are organized and structured to follow the timeline from their arrival in Berlin until the interviews were conducted. They guide the reader through the dynamics of respondents' experiences and perceptions alongside the administrative process of asylum-seeking. Finally, I provide a coherent conclusion and recommendations for further research and address the limitations of this study.

2 Literature Review

Scholars distinguish two kinds of literature reviews: narrative and systematic (Bryman, 2016). I will employ the first one: a narrative review, because it allows me to identify what is already known in the field of my interests and make an overview of the relevant literature (ibid). My research will follow this to produce new knowledge and fill the gap. The literature review is an essential aspect of the research process to identify relevant concepts and theories as well as

research methods and designs in the field of your interest (ibid). To carry out a comprehensive narrative literature review, I used two central databases: *Sociology Collection* and *Scopus*, to find relevant peer-reviewed articles, research, or any other relevant literature related to my research subject.

Keywords: “queer migrant” or “LGBT* migrant,” “LGBT* refugee,” “forced migration,” “integration,” and “European Union.”

Initially, I entered into the search engines the different variations of keywords related to asylum-seeking because my study mainly focuses on queer asylum seekers instead of migrants. However, it did not work successfully since only a few articles were found. Therefore, I had to rework on the keywords to broaden the search scope. Eventually, I arrived at the abovementioned keywords, which showed more than 20 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and related articles. In addition to that, I utilized *Google Scholar* to complement the data and provide a more comprehensive review.

After the search, I read the titles and abstracts of the studies and selected the most relevant ones for my research subject. In cases I was suspicious, I downloaded articles, read the full text, and decided accordingly. Notably, most of the studies were irrelevant because they focused on different aspects of the migration experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, such as minority stress, identity formation, mental health, etc. It is worth mentioning that there are studies on queer asylum seekers outside of Europe, for instance, in the USA and Canada. However, I decided not to include them in the literature review because of the significance of the context in which LGBTQ+ asylum seekers navigate. As a result of optimization, in the following section, I overviewed and discussed the most relevant literature related to the social integration of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Europe.

2.1 Social Integration of Queer Asylum Seekers

Alessi et al. (2018) conducted a study, “A *Qualitative Exploration of the Integration Experiences of LGBTQ Refugees Who Fled from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South Asia to Austria and the Netherlands* in 2018 on the integration experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees from Islamic societies in Austria and the Netherlands. The researchers carried out qualitative interviews with 19 queer refugees in each country. In addition, they

interviewed five professionals that provide services to LGBTQ+ asylum claimants for triangulation means. The aim was to shed light on the challenges these groups face regarding integration in the European context. The study findings showed that queer asylum claimants face several key integration-related challenges. First of all, according to the study, the main problem of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers encounter in the integration process is related to their precarious livelihoods and obstacles to employment, which results in financial instability. In addition, the study showed that the uncertainty of the asylum process affects the well-being of queer asylum seekers.

Moreover, they relied on the receiving society to get support for dealing with difficulties and softening the integration process. Instead, they often encountered discrimination based on different characteristics, such as religion, race, or refugeeness. Furthermore, they experienced various forms of discrimination and maltreatment based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, not only from the local society but from other migrant communities as well. Consequently, such circumstances limit their access to important services and further obstruct the integration process. Remarkably, this study revealed the differences in experiences of asylum seekers regarding geographical location. Findings showed that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers encountered more direct and intentional discrimination in Vienna, while subtler forms were detected in Amsterdam. Overall, this study illustrated how multiple, often marginalized identities of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers form their migration experiences.

In addition, Andrade et al. (2020) developed *Queering Asylum in Europe: A Survey Report* based on the SOGICA Project. The research project aimed to explore the social and legal experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants across Europe. Although the researchers used Germany, Italy, and the UK as case studies, the data was collected through online surveys from different European countries, covering the European Union or The Council of Europe. According to the report, 82 LGBTQ+ asylum claimants and 157 supporters/service providers participated in the survey. However, 54% of those asylum seekers claimed asylum in the countries concerned, and 65% of the supporters lived there. I put emphasis on the social aspect of this report because of its relevance to my study. The majority of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants reported discrimination experiences based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or combination of those. In addition, 83% of the supporters confirmed that they knew queer asylum claimants with such experiences. The study disclosed that more than 40% of the

LGBTQ+ asylum claimants felt unsafe in reception centers, shelters, and private accommodations. In response, most supporters stressed that specific shelter or other accommodations tailored to their needs would benefit queer asylum seekers.

Moreover, more than half of the respondents reported mental health problems related to persecution and discrimination because of their identity in their countries of origin or the asylum process. However, a majority (almost 60%) of those who received support claimed that the LGBTQ+ organizations provided the assistance and services. Therefore, the vital role of such NGOs in supporting this group is highlighted. Andrade et al. (2020) argue that queer asylum seekers often feel socially isolated due to the fear of homophobia, transphobia, or vulnerability because of their ethnic origin or refugeeness. To sum up, the study's findings indicated the prevalence of discrimination against and mistreatment towards LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in their receiving countries. They provided insights concerning the challenges and the needs they faced.

Furthermore, Held (2022), based on the SOGICA Project data, wrote an article, *“As queer refugees, we are out of category, we do not belong to one, or the other”*: *LGBTIQ+ refugees’ experiences in “ambivalent” queer spaces*” and provided in-depth analysis of queer asylum seekers’ experiences. In the article, the homonationalist perspective, which divides countries into liberal and homophobic and assumes that LGBTIQ+ refugees will be liberated and able to live openly upon arriving in "gay-friendly" Europe, is challenged. The article further discusses the equivocal experiences of queer asylum seekers in queer support groups, queer leisure spaces, and intimate relationships while arguing that the asylum regimes are oppressive, which negatively affects the well-being of the asylum seekers. Held (2022) employed intersectional lenses to analyze the data and argued that LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers face complex forms of oppression based on sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, religion, race, and refugeeness. She argues that intersectional lenses are a precondition to understanding the complex, integration-related experiences of queer asylum seekers.

The article delineates the widespread discrimination and support of queer asylum seekers by the receiving queer community. The author argued that queer spaces are not only sexualized but racialized, too, dominated by white, middle-class gay men. The analysis further showed that power imbalances could exist within LGBTIQ+ support groups, although they provide

crucial assistance to queer asylum claimants. For example, some queer asylum claimants reported a positive experience of support and empowerment from the groups working with queer asylum seekers. In contrast, others claimed they had experienced fetishization and sexual exploitation from the white-dominated gay community. The issue of power imbalance is raised by the researcher (ibid).

Moreover, it claims that queer spaces can be exclusionary due to economic reasons, door policies, racializing practices, and their exoticization within the local queer community that exacerbates feelings of non-belonging. Furthermore, they also struggle to build serious intimate relationships with the queer communities of the receiving country, as often they are not taken seriously. Some of the research respondents recall their experiences of rejection based on their refugeeness/ethnicity/race with potential sexual partners both online and in person. Overall, queer asylum seekers are out of category: they belong to the LGBTQ+ community for the general refugee population, while for the local LGBTQ+ community, they are refugees, a category that is racialized and stigmatized.

The article stresses that these exclusionary experiences in queer spaces are influenced by race and the individuals' refugeeness, including issues such as not being taken seriously as sexual partners due to their precarious conditions and power imbalances. Most importantly, the author stresses out that the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ refugees' experiences demand a distinct consideration of refugeeness as a category within the intersectional analysis alongside factors like citizenship status; otherwise, the intersectional analysis will not be able to provide a comprehensive understanding of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants' experiences. The article argues that by taking an intersectional approach, the ambivalence in the experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees in support groups and queer spaces becomes evident instead of remaining simplistic binary (positive/negative) characterization of those experiences. Furthermore, the author suggests that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are not passive victims of asylum experiences; instead, they possess a comprehensive understanding of intersectionality, drawing on their personal experiences and knowledge, which empowers them to articulate and bring attention to the exclusionary and oppressive practices they encounter.

Overall, this study explores the complex and diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in European countries. It emphasizes how their freedom is limited due to asylum regulations

and the various types of oppression they face. The study also examines the complex dynamics within LGBTIQ+ support groups and queer spaces, highlighting ambiguous emotions and challenges while valuing the autonomy and expertise of LGBTIQ+ refugees themselves. Last but not least, it emphasizes the significance of adopting an intersectional approach that recognizes refugeeness as a unique category in research with queer asylum seekers/refugees.

Last but not least, Chossière (2021) contributed to this field with substantial knowledge through his article “*Refugeeness, Sexuality, and Gender: Spatialized Lived Experiences of Intersectionality by Queer Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Paris.*” His study is based on a three-year (2017-2020) ethnographic fieldwork at the NGO in Paris, which supports LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers. The author was involved voluntarily in diverse work and activities. He taught French to the queer asylum claimants for more than one year. The author also assisted them individually with the relevant asylum procedures and co-organized meetings to welcome new queer asylum seekers looking for support from the organization. He met many LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers through different contexts within and outside the organization. As described in the study, the researcher documented his observations in detailed field notes, and overall, through these interactions, he formed a group of 76 individuals with whom communication in person took place at least three times. Notably, the majority of the participants (66) were gay men, eight women, one trans woman, and one questioning person. In addition to that, he conducted 33 interviews with 31 queer asylum seekers or refugees. This study further explored how the experiences of queer asylum seekers and refugees are influenced by the intersection of their gender, sexuality, and refugeeness. It emphasized how being a refugee is shaped by everyday experiences of othering processes and feeling like an outsider in the country they arrive in. In addition, the role of the state institutions as well as LGBTIQ+ organizations in the othering process was found. For example, they often needed to go to the state institution after midnight and stand in the queue or sleep there to avoid long waiting time and get the service the next morning faster. In addition, queer asylum seekers needed to stand in a long queue at the entrance of the queer NGOs to receive short counseling from the organizations’ volunteers. Moreover, the study showed that their vulnerable situation in relation to legal and socio-economic context, such as inadequate housing, not having permission to work, or generally taking control over their lives alongside attempts of the police to hide them from the central districts of Paris contribute to the othering process and further marginalization of queer asylum seekers. These factors, of course, hinder their social integration process in the local society.

This study also suggested that migration experiences do not liberate LGBTQ+ asylum seekers but expose them to new power imbalances and social hierarchies. Queer asylum seekers are afraid to report their experiences of violence or mistreatment due to the feeling of unlawfulness caused by asylum procedures and practices. In addition, this study's findings indicated that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers try to prevent socializing in queer spaces for several reasons, including door policies of some such places or the fear of police. At the same time, they would not be believed in case of conflicts. Moreover, the participants reported experiences of being fetishized as well as rejected based on their refugee status or skin color. The research findings indicated the lack of trans* related knowledge within the authorities and problems related to their legal gender recognition, which burdens them disproportionately. For example, placing trans* women in a men's accommodation or other forms of misgendering seems to be an issue.

Last but not least, in line with similar studies, the article argued that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are the subject of minimum two-way marginalization. On the one hand, they are the target of anti-refugee attitudes from the local society; on the other hand, they face homo/transphobia from their ethnic-like communities. In addition, they are likely to experience multiple overlapping forms of inequalities. Lee and Brotman (2011, cited in Chossière, 2021) claim that queer asylum seekers experience compound exclusion that intersects with racism in the queer community and homophobia in the national society. However, Chossière (2021) argues that instead of accepting the labels and processes imposed on them, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees tend to actively navigate and manage the categories and labels they are assigned, sometimes by hiding them or using them strategically to receive the support needed. For example, their multiple intersecting identities can confront them with different forms of discrimination and mistreatment. In contrast, the same identities in different contexts may enable them to get crucial support from relevant individuals, groups, or organizations. Moreover, the collective identity formation of the LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees and their joint efforts may bring benefit for them all.

To sum up, existing literature on the social integration of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers mainly focus on queer support groups, queer spaces, intimate relationships, and interactive experiences with local society and like-ethnic communities and their effects. In most cases, the studies provided apply intersectional analysis to shed light on the significance of their intersecting identities and the complexities of inequalities they encounter in the integration process. I

acknowledge that not many studies are discussed in the literature review; however, the articles provided are credible and most relevant, which allowed me to broaden my knowledge in the field and contextualize my research. In addition, all the study findings reviewed in the literature part comply with each other to some extent and indicate multiple forms of inequalities LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face, as well as their resilience to navigate in different contexts. However, I could not find comprehensive research on the social integration of queer asylum seekers based on three indicators of the social connections domain. Moreover, there is limited knowledge regarding the social integration-related experiences of queer asylum seekers, while no data exists for those coming from Georgia. That is why I will explore the social integration experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in Berlin, Germany. Doing so will contribute to the knowledge production on the wider topic of queer asylum seekers' integration-related experiences in the EU.

3 Theoretical/Analytical Considerations

Epistemology deals with the issue of what kind of knowledge should be considered legitimate (Bryman, 2016). Two central epistemological positions are distinguished in social science research: positivism and interpretivism. The former advocates for the utilization of the same principles and procedures for understanding the social world as natural science use (ibid). The latter contradicts positivism and affirms that the social world fundamentally differs from the natural one. Therefore, the second stance, interpretivism, argues that, unlike the natural world, reality does not exist by itself in a social world. According to this position, people create reality by giving meaning to it (ibid). Following the epistemological assumptions, I have used the integration framework's social connections domain and intersectional lenses to analyze the data.

3.1 Social Connections

The domain of social connection consists of three indicators: social bridges, social bonds, and social links. They address different aspects of social integration and constitute the relatively same importance to driving the integration process at the local level. I briefly explained the meanings of each indicator and provided some relevant data illustrating asylum seekers' experiences.

3.1.1 Social Bridges

The social bridges focus on the relationship between the refugees and the society of the country they resettled in. According to the recent study *States and Refugee Integration: a Comparative Analysis of France, Germany, and Switzerland* (Feinstein et al., 2022), refugees in all three countries experience discrimination from the local societies. The major problem remains the generalization and stereotyping of refugees based on their country of origin, religion, and other attributes. For example, refugees are associated with religious radicalism, terrorism, and crime, which leads to their marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination in the receiving countries. While most literature emphasizes the integration of refugees from Muslim countries into western, predominantly Christian societies, little is known about the experiences of those fleeing from Christian states. Therefore, my goal was to shed light on the experiences of social bridging of Georgian (mostly Christian state) queer asylum seekers with the local society in Berlin, Germany.

3.1.2 Social Bonds

The social bonds examine the relationship of refugees within their ethnic communities. Phillimore (2020) argues that establishing positive relationships with people from the same country and practicing the same culture smooths the integration process.

Furthermore, studies show that it has a productive effect on the health outcomes of refugees (Phillimore, 2020). However, there can be differences that can cause problems between the early generation and newcomer refugees. For example, Feinstein et al. (2022) discuss the incompatible point of view of old and new waves of refugees on the role of women in society. Some agree that Syrian women should give up the hijab, while others disagree (ibid). This highlights that social bonding can empower or oppress some subgroups within the refugee community.

However, Beiser 1993 (cited in Phillimore and Goodson 2008) argues that refugees who have the opportunity to establish social bonds with their ethnic groups are four times less likely to report depression experiences in comparison with those who do not. The importance of social bonding is evident, which motivates me to investigate this aspect of social connection further. No such literature exists on social bonding experiences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+

asylum seekers. Having discussed the widespread homophobia in Georgia, it is crucial to investigate how Georgian queer asylum seekers experience social bonding with each other and non-LGBTQ+ Georgian asylum seekers.

3.1.3 Social Links

Unlike social bridges and social bonds, social links facilitate the relationship between refugees and the state, namely government services, which are essential for the well-being of the refugees and their successful integration (Phillimore, 2020). The strong social links ensure equal access to social services, such as housing, employment, rights, etc. that can be threatened due to the language barrier or any other factors (ibid). That is where the commitment from the state and the receiving society is required, too, in order to support the integration process. According to Feinstein et al. (2022), I can argue that host countries tend to neglect these needs, which results in inadequate service provision, causing a lower quality of life.

Furthermore, due to weak social links, refugees experienced exclusion, ignorance, and helplessness, all of them making their lives feel undignified. While this is a general, widespread challenge for most of the refugee population, examining the relationship between queer refugees and the state is attractive, especially considering that they seek asylum based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Identifying the experiences of social linking for Georgian queer asylum seekers in Berlin will contribute to a better understanding of their social integration process.

I have applied this framework to the data to better understand how the relationships with local society, fellow Georgians, and state institutions affect the social integration process of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin, Germany.

3.2 Intersectionality

The term intersectionality appeared by the end of the 20th century and became part of black feminism (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). The theory emerged from the intersecting oppressive experiences of sex and race of real people that are black women (Crenshaw 1989). The author claims that intersectionality is based on the hierarchical systems created by the interrelations of race, class, and gender. It criticizes the social and political order that places

certain groups on top of the hierarchy and others on the bottom, resulting in the domination and subordination of different social groups (ibid). MacKinnon (2013) claims that the intersectional approach makes it possible to shed light on and analyze social forces of power that create hierarchies that drive inequality. Intersectionality is closely related to the analysis of power. The authors claim that while some scholars may argue that intersectionality emphasizes intersecting identities and categories, it also aims at shedding light on structural inequalities (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013).

Crenshaw (1989) criticizes the traditional framework of discrimination and stresses that, unlike that, intersectionality aims at the analysis of different variables that are greater than just the sum of those variables. For example, the idea of her original work on intersectionality was to illustrate that the experiences of black women were more than just the sum of sexism and racism. MacKinnon (2013) argues that through intersectional analysis, the identities of certain groups are not problematized but the results of how they are seen and treated in society. There is a big difference between intersectional analysis and just discussing the intersection categories because “Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Nevertheless, they often experience double discrimination - the combined effects of practices that discriminate based on race and sex. Moreover, sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women - not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (Crenshaw 1989).

Parent, DeBlaere, and Moradi (2013) argue that intersectionality has been a huge move forward and is essential for research in various fields. Intersectionality has become widespread in different disciplines and is often employed by feminist scholars. It has become part of social movements and anti-discrimination politics (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). Moreover, some of the studies (Held, 2022; Chossière, 2021; Alessi et al., 2018) discussed in the literature review also utilized intersectionality in their research with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees. The chosen variables for those studies were mostly sexual orientation, gender identity, and refugeeness.

In this thesis, the theory of intersectionality has been used to explore the discrimination and oppression experienced by the Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants based on their sexual

orientation, gender identity, and status of asylum-seeking or refugeeness. In addition, other categories, such as religion, ethnicity, etc., were touched upon/applied where applicable to complement the intersectional analysis and show how different the individual's experiences can be depending on their intersecting identities despite belonging to one category of LGBTQ+.

To sum up, the integration framework's indicators of social connection and intersectional lenses were applied to the data for the means of comprehensive analysis.

4 Methodology

Ontological considerations alongside epistemological stances broadly define research methodologies. Ontology is concerned with the nature of the social world. It distinguishes two central positions: objectivism (which claims that social objects exist independently without social actors who give meaning to them) and constructionism (which argues that social categories and objects are continuously socially constructed through the interaction between individuals) (Bryman, 2016). The constructionist ontological positions are usually associated with qualitative research in social sciences. Qualitative research methods are considered more suitable for investigating how the members of certain groups interpret their social world because it is more sensitive toward this kind of issue (ibid). Additionally, it allows the researcher to see things from the participants' eyes (Bryman, 2016). However, in social research, there is a risk of misinterpretation of the respondents' views by the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The researchers may develop their own understanding and interpret the participants' experiences differently (Bryman, 2016). There was a similar danger associated with my research because I collected the data and analyzed it among the community I know very well; therefore, I might have had some unknown assumptions, which could lead to misinterpretation of their understanding of the social world. The strategies for minimizing this risk are addressed in the section on reliability and validity. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the danger arising from the powerful position of the researcher to romanticize and appropriate the positions of the less powerful respondents by claiming that they know/understand the target group well, Haraway (1988) argues that value-neutral objective research is not considered possible from a feminist perspective and that we as researchers are always affected by our positions, perspectives, and experiences. Correspondingly, Bryman (2016) asserts that for feminist research, being value-neutral and objective is against feminist

values because the research should aim to expose oppressive systems in the patriarchal society. My goal was to shed light on the systems of inequality but not at the expense of misinterpreting the data.

4.1 Research Design

I chose qualitative research methods because I am interested in an in-depth understanding of the social integration experiences of the LGBTQ+ community who sought asylum in Germany. Primarily, I was interested in their own understanding of their experiences and how they make sense of the social world around them. The author drew on the compatibility of feminism with qualitative and quantitative research and explained that some scholars claim that qualitative research is more consistent with feminist values and ideas (Bryman, 2016). I do not necessarily support the idea of quantitative research being incompatible with feminism. However, I chose qualitative research methods since they better responded to my goals. It allowed me to thoroughly study the social integration-related experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin, Germany, thus filling the knowledge gap. I do not expect this work to trigger significant policy changes to improve their conditions. However, at least I will do my best to initiate discussions based on my research findings among relevant stakeholders. In addition, I hope that this study can provoke further research in this particular field.

In line with qualitative research methodology, a case study design was employed because it strongly aligns with my research aim. According to Gilgun (1994), a case can be a single individual, group of people or family, institution or organization, community, etc. In the case study, the researcher is interested in the case and aims at its in-depth investigation (Bryman, 2016). Gilgun (1994) argues that a case study can be an effective method in social work to understand the social problem thoroughly and assess the development of particular processes or public policies and their effects on individuals and groups within a particular context. The author emphasizes the significance of context in case study research and argues that the case should be investigated alongside its particular context to achieve its goal (ibid). Moreover, this method intends close scrutinization of individual attributes, social environments and settings, interventions, and their results. It has the ability to reveal the experiences and interpretations of individuals or groups towards public policies, which affect them in one way or another (Gilgun, 1994). In this study, I was interested in the experiences of a very specific group that

was also located in a particular geographical area. Hence, the case study design facilitated an extensive examination of the problem and context and effectively served the goal of this research.

4.2 Research Method

The interview is the most common method for data collection in qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). I utilized the semi-structured interview method to collect the data from the participants because, as already noted above, I was primarily interested in how my target group saw the world. The semi-structured interviews provide open-ended questions, which allow participants to deliver their own understanding of the social world (ibid). This complies with feminist research values too. To achieve my goals, I created an interview guide based on my research questions and social connections domain of the integration framework and conducted semi-structured interviews. The interview guide consisted of five different parts, among which the first one covered questions related to interviewees' demographic information; the next three parts focused on three domains of social integration: social bridges - interaction with local society in Berlin; social bonds - interaction with ethnic Georgians in Berlin; and social links - interaction with state institutions. And the last section aimed to determine their strategies for handling integration-related challenges.

A literature review and statistical data complemented this data to provide a more convincing narrative. The interviews took place in a safe and confidential space, at a queer refugee shelter in Berlin. I have also offered an alternative space in case anyone had privacy or safety issues; however, all of them agreed to be interviewed in the place of their residence.

4.3 Sampling

In qualitative research, the discussion is around purposive sampling. The participants are chosen based on a non-probability principle strategically relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, researchers usually create a list of criteria for recruiting the relevant participants for the research (ibid). For my research, I employed a purposive sampling technique and also developed several criteria for participant recruitment. The list of criteria to get involved in the study was as follows:

- The participant is 18 years old or older.
- The participant identifies as LGBTQ+.
- The participant comes from Georgia.
- The participant claimed asylum based on SOGI in Germany between 2021 and 2022.
- The participant has been living in the queer refugees' shelter at the time of the interview.

I made this decision because I was interested in those LGBTQ+ individuals who were localized in a specific time and space. Otherwise, the experiences of participants who moved to Berlin years ago or those placed in a non-LGBTQ+ refugee shelter may significantly differ. I pre-screened the potential respondents and invited those who met all the criteria for the interview. Actually, I did not reject anyone since everyone who expressed interest qualified. All the interviews took place at the queer refugees' shelter in a separate room during 17- 28 March 2023. This particular LGBTQ+ refugee shelter has the capacity to accommodate up to 110 asylum seekers. According to the management information, around 25-30 registered Georgians lived in the shelter by the time of the interviews. Therefore, my sample size constitutes one-third of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers living in that shelter, which is sufficient to capture diverse experiences.

In case of any difficulties related to purposive sampling, I planned to employ the snowball technique to recruit the participants. This issue became important because I wanted to ensure that the voices of different subgroups (gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans*, queer) among the LGBTQ+ community were represented equally to the maximum extent possible for these circumstances. The experiences of a trans* woman and a lesbian woman may differ significantly. Therefore, mixing the sampling strategies sounded like a practical approach. The snowball technique is usually used when the members of a particular community or group are difficult to reach out to, and initial participants recommend the next ones who are characterized with the attributes interesting for the research (Bryman, 2016). However, there is a risk associated with a snowball technique because I may have documented only one or a few kinds of experiences, either exceptionally good or exceptionally bad. Nevertheless, there is no such danger in this study because, eventually, there was no need to employ a snowball method.

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants among Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers at a queer refugee shelter in Berlin, Germany. First of all, I informed the

shelter's manager via email (a copy of the email can be accessed/forwarded by request) about the research project and asked for permission to conduct the interviews with the Georgian residents of the shelter. In addition, I asked her for a separate room to conduct the interviews in a safe and confidential environment. After acquiring permission from the shelter management, I verbally spread information about the research project among the Georgian queer residents. Social workers of the shelter assisted me in disseminating the information, too, to reach out to a maximum number of residents. In addition, the residents were asked to share the information among each other. I provided the same information to all parties; namely, I told them that the research project was part of my postgraduate education in social work and human rights at Gothenburg University, Sweden. My aim was to explore social integration-related experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin, Germany (the formulation of the aim broadened since then). To achieve that goal, I needed to conduct about ten interviews, each approximately one hour long. The participation was completely voluntary, which also meant that the interviewee could avoid answering any convenient questions or withdraw from participation at any time. In addition, I explained that I would do my best to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents. Last but not least, I expressed my readiness to answer any questions or provide detailed information related to the research project.

Eventually, the sample included eight LGBTQ+ asylum seekers from Georgia who migrated to Germany between 2021-2022. They all claimed asylum in their destination country due to persecution and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. By the time of the interviews, asylum applications of all of them had been rejected by the German authorities, and they were in the process of appeal in the court. I put much effort into ensuring equal representation of different sub-groups within this research because each of them has unique stories and experiences; however, it was impossible due to numerous circumstances. For instance, based on the information from the management, there were only two Georgian lesbian women in the shelter, while not a single Georgian bisexual or trans* man at the time of the interviews being conducted. Even though gay men and trans* women constituted the majority among the Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in this shelter, trans* women were more eager to participate in the research. Regardless, to some extent, the list of participants represents the existing share of each sub-groups at queer refugees' shelter. Remarkably, in contrast with many similar studies, this one captured the experiences of queer asylum seekers without an activism

background, which makes it even more interesting. Despite the lack of activist perspectives, amplifying non-activist voices in this context becomes the strength of my thesis.

4.4 Interviews

The interview started with the introduction of the research project: the idea, goal, and procedure alongside their rights to abstain from any questions or withdraw from participation at any time during the interview. After that, they were introduced to an informed consent form in the Georgian language and provided further, detailed information through verbal communication about this research project. Specifically, I informed them that this study is part of my postgraduate social work and human rights education at Gothenburg University and aims to explore the social integration-related challenges of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin. Hereafter, each of them signed the consent forms, which are kept with me. To see the consent forms both in Georgian and English, please check *Appendix 1*.

I used the semi-structured interview to obtain information about their social integration-related experiences in Berlin. The interview guide was divided into five parts: demographic information, their interaction experiences with the local community in Berlin, their interaction experiences with other Georgians in Berlin, their interaction experiences with state institutions in Berlin, and the last part consisted of their strategies to deal with stress and their ideas for improving their conditions in the asylum process as well as supporting their social integration process. The interview started with general questions to collect their demographic information. I asked for their age, the city/region of Georgia they come from, employment status in Georgia, highest attained education level, sexual orientation, gender identity, date of arrival to Berlin, Germany, date of submitting their asylum application, and the status of their application. After that, the following sections were enquired. At the end of each interview, I gave all respondents full freedom to share anything concerning their integration or asylum process. The interview guide, both in English and Georgian, can be found in *Appendix 2*.

Interviews were conducted in the Georgian language; the shortest interview lasted 35 minutes, and the longest was 80 minutes. After that, I transcribed all the interviews in a denaturalized format; all the nonverbal vocalizations, pauses, etc., were removed from the text, and informational content was emphasized (Oliver, Serovich, and Mason, 2005). I made such a decision because the purpose of this research project is to observe the content and the meaning

of the information provided by the respondents as well as their perceptions of social reality. Therefore, by choosing a denaturalized approach, I put the emphasis on their perceptions rather than their communication style. Moreover, I transcribed the full recordings and not some sections to ensure that no information was missed from the data. After the transcription, I listened to the recordings again and read the written interviews before proceeding to the analysis.

4.1 Participant Profiles

In this section, I will briefly give an overview of the interviewees' demographic information, which could be interesting in relation to the whole study. The main demographic information/background of the research participants are as follows:

SOGI: Out of eight participants, four identified as trans* women, two as gay men, one as lesbian woman, and one as questioning.

Age: the interviewees were between the ages of 25 and 44.

Education: four respondents reported having completed high school, three of them reported having vocational education/training, and one claimed to have incomplete higher education.

Employment: two of them were employed as freelancers, three of them were involved in sex work either permanently or occasionally, one of them was employed in the public sector, and another one had an employment experience in the private sector, namely in the hospitality services, but reported being unemployed for about a year by the time of leaving the country, yet another one was unemployed for past several years.

City/region: three respondents came from and lived in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia; four of them grew up in the region but had been living in Tbilisi for the last 6-10 years, and one of them came from and lived in one of the big cities in the region of Georgia.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

I utilized thematic analysis to evaluate the data after the transcription of the interviews. There are no universal guidelines on how to proceed with thematic analysis (Hammersley and

Atkinson, 2007); instead, the method allows to focus on the content of the provided data, such as interviews or written documents (Riessman, 2008). Mishra and Dey (2022) argue that themes are the most occurred and important ideas or concepts mentioned by the respondents. The name of the theme can be a quote from the participant, a metaphor, a noun, a verb, or anything that is abstract and speculative and provides a conceptual understanding of the theme (ibid). In addition, researchers should pay attention to several things in the data in order to understand and develop themes, among which are: repetitions, autochthonous terms, figurative language, and linking words or changes in the narrative, all by the respondent (Ryan and Bernard, 2003 cited in Mishra and Dey, 2022). This method allows researchers to analyze data in a way that is responsive to the unique features of their research question, data, and context. Moreover, it can provide a rich and detailed understanding of the data, as it involves a close examination of the content of the data, which can be particularly useful for exploring complex social phenomena (Bryman, 2016).

For my research project, this method was the best to analyze the data because, on the one hand, it enabled me to observe the reoccurring, important topics for the respondents. On the other hand, it gave them the opportunity to describe their reality in their own words from their own perspectives. In addition, I used a combination of the strategies mentioned above to name the themes and sub-themes so that they describe the experiences and perceptions of the research participants.

Since there is no universal procedure for thematic analysis, transparency becomes the most important aspect of this method to establish credibility and increase the reliability of the results. I followed this approach and decided to be transparent in all actions I undertook during all stages of this study. Throughout the process of coming back and forth between the data, the themes and sub-themes were rearranged numerous times based on my chosen theories and self-reflection. The thematic analysis involves several steps, such as coding, creating themes, going back and forth, reviewing, and analyzing (Bryman, 2016). Eventually, I decided to group most of the sub-themes under three indicators of the social connections domain, which also served as themes. In addition, a couple of themes were developed separately. Alongside thematic analysis of the data, intersectional lenses were applied to understand better the complexities of the inequalities which affect Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and define their experiences. In addition, previous, similar studies were utilized in relation to my research findings to

complement the data and provide even more in-depth analysis. As a result, the analysis is responsive to the research focus and reflects the meaning of the data to the maximum extent. Further information on the themes developed during the thematic analysis will be provided later in the relevant section.

Initially, I planned to use the software program NVivo to code the data, organize it into themes and analyze it. However, working with writing papers, posters, pens, pencils, and colorful highlighters turned out to be more convenient this time.

4.3 Reliability and Validity

To establish the trustworthiness of this study, in this part, I evaluated different procedures, choices, and other relevant aspects undertaken during all stages of my research. In qualitative research, rigor is paramount; otherwise, it risks the study's practicality and usefulness (Morse et al., 2002). To secure the rigor of the research, determining the criteria for reliability and validity becomes essential (ibid). Lincoln and Guba (1985) replaced reliability and validity with the term trustworthiness and developed principles for the quality assessment of qualitative research. Their evaluative criteria consist of four different aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to guarantee trustworthiness (ibid). In addition, the authors developed various strategies for evaluating each aspect. I discussed each criterion in relation to my study to establish its trustworthiness.

Credibility - among provided seven strategies to establish credibility, four of them applied to my study: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking. In my research, prolonged engagement was involved because I spent about five months in the queer refugee shelter, where the study's respondents were accommodated in 2022. I used to visit the shelter every day for one month and a half as part of my university field placement. Apart from that, I used to go to the shelter at least four times a week for voluntary language interpretation and translation (English-Georgian-English) between Georgian queer asylum seekers and social workers, and the shelter manager. Moreover, I moved to Berlin at the beginning of the degree report course, and before the data collection, I used to visit the shelter at least once a week for the above-mentioned voluntary work. This time allowed me to understand the context and setting of the shelter, have conversations with different people living or working there, and build trust among potential respondents - all indicating successful

prolonged engagement (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). These aspects further encouraged the development of a mutual understanding of the meanings between me, as a researcher, and the participants. Hence, the application of this strategy strengthens the credibility of my study. In addition, persistent observation was conducted during my time at the shelter, which allowed me to detect and further explore the most relevant issues concerning my research area. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), persistent observation offers an in-depth understanding of social phenomena. Triangulation is used for a confirmation of the findings as well as a comprehensive understanding of the issue under research focus (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). There are four types of triangulation: methods, sources, analyst, and theory/perspective triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999, cited in Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). In my research, triangulation was achieved mostly by triangulation of sources and theory/perspective triangulation. First of all, I had many informal talks with the shelter manager⁸ about Georgian queer asylum seekers in relation to my research project, as she was aware of it and was supportive in the process. The content of these conversations was consistent with the data collected from the participants. In addition, the previous research findings with queer asylum seekers in Europe aligned with mine. I argue that, to some extent, the analyst triangulation was also included because the supervisor's feedback encouraged me to reflect on my preconceptions and to see various ways of interpreting the data. Moreover, I suggest that the application of integration framework alongside intersectionality served as a theory/perspective triangulation in my study as it allowed me to observe the data from different angles and analyze it from various aspects. Last, I will discuss the member check method because of its significance in establishing credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Despite my ambition, it was impossible to obtain the confirmation of the analysis due to the respondents limited availability and a lack of time from my side. However, it is worth mentioning that during the interviews, I summarized their narrative with my words at the end of each section of the interview guide to ensure that I understood exactly what they had told me. In the case of the confirmation of my narrative, we moved to the next section. In contrast, in cases of differences that took place during the two interviews, I gave the space to the respondents to clarify the particular aspects of the information. Therefore, in that sense, I argue that member check was still employed to

⁸ She was informed that I had been working on this thesis and would utilize some of the information provided by her.

some extent. Overall, these strategies established this study's credibility despite some shortcomings, such as not making field notes during the observation or the informal talks with the shelter manager.

Transferability - this principle refers to the detailed description of the steps taken during the research and the whole phenomena, including its context, and aims at establishing external validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The thick description serves as the strategy for ensuring transferability. It involves a detailed description of the lived experiences of the target group within the context (Holloway, 1997, cited in Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). I made substantial efforts to ensure transparency in this study by providing information about the procedures and argumentation for my choices. Furthermore, the micro, as well as macro contexts were reviewed in the introduction as well as discussion parts of this paper in order to provide in-depth understanding. These measures can be seen throughout this thesis.

Dependability - this criterion was fulfilled through an external audit at the seminar, which took place on 24 May 2023 at the University of Gothenburg as part of the degree report course. The opponent student provided feedback on my degree report, which allowed me to reflect critically and challenge different stages of my research and the analysis part. Eventually, this process facilitated the development of a stronger research paper and reinforced validity.

Confirmability - this criterion aims to confirm that the findings are determined based on the data provided by the respondents instead of the researcher's bias and motivation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To achieve this criterion, the authors provided four strategies: external audit, audit trail, triangulation, and reflexivity (ibid). I have already addressed external audit and triangulation aspects and will move on to the audit trail and reflexivity. The audit trail refers to the detailed description of all actions taken from the beginning of the research project until the end. The audit trail should involve Various types of information (Halpern, 1983; cited in Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I will address each of them in relation to what has been done in my study. Raw data: All the audio recordings of the interviews, full printed transcripts (with relevant comments and reflections of mine), and informed consent forms signed by each participant, are kept with me. Authorized individuals from the university can have access to them on request. They will be destroyed right after the announcement of the examination results. In addition, all the documents, such as articles, book chapters, etc., utilized during this

study's work process are kept on my laptop either in different folders or in the internet browser bookmarks. Data reduction and analysis products: Looking at the utilized literature, applied theoretical concepts, and the data after the analysis and conclusion assured me of the substantial quality of the interpretation. However, I also realized that applying the whole integration framework and additional variables (such as class, physical appearance, etc.) to the intersectional lenses would allow even more in-depth analysis. All of this was not possible in this study due to the limited resources. Data reconstruction and synthesis products: The development of the themes and sub-themes are explained in this report. The paper notes that capture this process will remain with me until the examination results are announced. In addition, the principles, and choices in establishing and naming themes and sub-themes are discussed, and their suitability to data is argued in the study. The themes and sub-themes are clear, and their names hold explanatory power. Apart from this, chosen theoretical frameworks and analytical lenses were applied to the analysis, and the conclusion was presented in reference to previous relevant studies. Process notes: The motives of my methodological, structural, theoretical, procedural, or any choices are discussed and justified in relevant parts of this paper and serve its transparency. Materials relating to intentions and dispositions: I did not have any document which captured my expectations and predictions about the findings of my study. However, it could be seen in the introduction based on the relevant literature. Otherwise, this is a good chance to disclose my expectations and prognosis. Initially, I thought that the migration experiences modify the forms of oppression for queer asylum seekers. While this can be the case for some, it is not the ultimate truth. Instead, my research showed that the migration experiences of queer asylum seekers transcend the binary character, making it impossible to describe it positively or negatively. Their experiences are complex and diverse, determined by their multilayer identities and many other factors. Instrument development information: Unfortunately, due to time constraints, the pilot interview was impossible to conduct; however, as addressed in the relevant part of this study, I made some changes in the sequence of the questions in the interviews guide after the first two interviews because I realized that the respondents had a more emotional involvement and wanted to start sharing their interaction experiences with fellow Georgians instead of local society in Berlin. Such adaptation in the research instrument ensured the smooth transition of the questions, which corresponded to the interviewees' needs. The authors argued that the auditor should be someone else rather than the researcher involved in the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Due

to the limited resources, I reflected on each criterion and strategy concerning my research to strengthen transparency. Based on this discussion, I argue that the data is grounded in the respondents' experiences, and consequently, analysis and conclusions are based on that rather than my presumptions.

The next strategy to be discussed here is reflexivity, which refers to the role of the researcher in the study. I provided brief information on my interests, background, and experiences concerning this research project at the beginning of this paper to increase transparency and strengthen trustworthiness. In addition, I had a particular document on my laptop, where I was writing the future steps, decisions, reflections, and ideas concerning different steps of the study. This document can serve as a reflexive journal, which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), fosters reflexivity. Moreover, feedback from the seminar mentioned above made me realize once again that my position and values as a queer activist and perspectives on the social work profession's role in ensuring social justice for all influenced the tone of the narrative in some parts of this thesis. However, I put effort into addressing such incidents.

To sum up, although it was impossible to consider or address all the strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, those measures taken during the study and this open discussion above strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings and the whole research.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is a vital part of social research. Ethical issues may arise at any stage and aspect of the research. Bryman (2016) discusses four main ethical principles which are relevant to social research: *harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception*. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) propose five slightly different categorizations: *harm, informed consent, privacy, exploitation, and consequences for future research*. Ethics are of the utmost importance and are a central point considering the specification and characteristics of the research topic and the participants. Therefore, I will strongly emphasize this aspect with my supervisor to minimize the ethical issues to the maximum extent. However, I will address all the potential ethical considerations in the following part:

1. Harm to participants - Participation in this research will not cause any direct physical harm to the participants; however, it may cause psychological harm to them because

forced migrants usually have unpleasant experiences in their country of origin, from where they fled. In addition, studies show that people who are in the process of asylum-seeking are vulnerable. There were several strategies I used to deal with this issue. First, I considered it when creating an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews to avoid topics that could be too sensitive. At the beginning of the interview, I clarified that they could avoid answering any inconvenient questions or even withdraw from participation. Secondly, I provided verbal information regarding the potential negative psychological consequences of being part of this research. Here, I should mention that alongside my practical experience of interviewing LGBTQ+ community members in Georgia, I read relevant literature about how to deal with emotional outbreaks during the interview in case of such a need. I have the advantage of being an outsider and an insider as a researcher, which allowed me to deal with such circumstances with the knowledge of the socio-cultural characteristics of the target population. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) claim that harm can happen to the participants as well as field workers. In this case, I was also the field worker who conducted the interviews; therefore, considering my belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, which has been emotionally involved in relevant issues, there was a risk of me getting traumatized in the process. Eventually, the data collection was carried out successfully without any such incidents.

2. Informed consent - to avoid the lack of consent, I prepared informed consent forms to explain the details about the research, background, aims, etc.⁹ After having received the information, all the participants read and signed it upon their participation. Nothing has been kept secret from the participants, and there has been honest communication from the researcher from the very beginning. In addition, I plan to translate the analysis part into Georgian and distribute it among them after the thesis submission.
3. Invasion of privacy is usually a crucial issue in social research, which gains even more significance when the research participants belong to any marginalized group or when the topic is sensitive. This is a subject of particular importance because of the

⁹ Details on what information was exactly given can be seen earlier in this report.

information about sexual orientation and gender identity or the experiences of violence and persecution. The term privacy is related to the protection of anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, I changed or removed all the identifiable information sections from the interviews, such as names, ages, and places of residence in Georgia. I keep the recordings and transcriptions in a secure space, which will be destroyed after the examination. Before the interviews, I consulted with a digital security specialist on how to have enhanced cyber security. I also explained to the participants the procedure of how I would deal with the data. In addition, since all the respondents live in the same shelter, they may recognize each other's experiences or thoughts. For the intersectional analysis, to enable in-depth scrutiny with the identification of similarities as well as differences, keeping their SOGI labels became an absolute necessity, which on the other hand, might jeopardize their anonymity from each other. To address this issue, I informed all of them on this matter during the interview, and they gave me their consent to keep the SOGI markers. Despite this, I consider the risk of harm low and have decided to keep the SOGI labels.

4. Deception - I am confident this issue will not arise in this case. Deception happens when the researcher provides different/wrong information to the participants about the research (Bryman, 2016). There is no risk of this happening because I have been explicit about the information on the research project in verbal and written forms (English/Georgian). The data will be used only for the original purposes and destroyed afterward. Furthermore, the data was collected in Georgian and translated into English for analysis; thus, there was a risk of me misinterpreting what the respondents had told me. Language is a crucial aspect of qualitative research because it allows the researcher to understand how the participants of the research view and frame their social world (Bryman, 2016). To minimize the risk, I read the translations several times to make sure that there were no mistakes. In addition, there might be some concepts or terminology without an exact translation from Georgian into English. In such situations, being familiar with language specificity would allow me to provide a detailed explanation/meaning of the term in the Georgian context. Thus, I would show what exactly respondents wanted to express and minimize the risk of misinterpretation.

5. Exploitation - this concerns the issues related to the benefits of the research. Some researchers claim that the participants who provide data benefit the researcher but do not get anything in return (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Usually, the data collection process comprises hierarchical relationships between the researcher, who is in a privileged position, and the participant, who is in a disadvantaged situation. Extracting the data/information from the powerless represents the act of exploitation (ibid). Furthermore, this can occur even in feminist research, where relationships tend to be non-hierarchical (Finch, 1984, cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Therefore, I thought carefully about how not to exploit my research participants. Unfortunately, I could not give financial or any direct incentives; however, I hope this study's findings will be useful in advocating for their rights in the future. Alternatively, it will be the inspiration for further research in the field.
6. Consequences for future research - this applies to the relationship between the researcher and their colleagues because once the researcher researches a group of people, later other researchers may be refused to access them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). If the participants of my research will not take part in other similar research, it may not be related to participation in my research at all; Despite this, I have taken responsibility for doing my best to prevent any unethical decision/action which could later result in refusal of participation in future research projects.

Apart from the general research ethics provided by scholars, research councils in different countries are responsible for ethical research. These institutions review and approve the research. In the following part, I briefly overviewed the *Good Research Practice* by Swedish Research Council. However, there was no need to get approval from the research council for this research project; instead, I dealt with it with my supervisor. Swedish Research Council (2017) in *Good Research Practice* provides eight main principles, which are a summary of the research ethics:

- 1) You shall tell the truth about your research.
- 2) You shall consciously review and report the basic premises of your studies.
- 3) You shall openly account for your methods and results.
- 4) You shall openly account for your commercial interests and other associations.

- 5) You shall not make unauthorized use of the research results of others.
- 6) You shall keep your research organized, for example, through documentation and filing.
- 7) You shall strive to conduct your research without doing harm to people, animals, or the environment.
- 8) You shall be fair in your judgment of others' research.

Considering that my research involves human beings, I discussed all the possible ethical issues that may arise with the supervisor and obtained the approval to proceed with data collection. However, I kept the discussion of ethics open until the submission of the thesis because ethics is a crucial aspect before, during, and after the research.

In addition, I searched for a similar document in Germany because the data collection is carried out here. I found Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice by German Research Foundation (2019). I read the document carefully, and nothing was essentially different from the ethical issues I discussed earlier. Therefore, I did not provide its overview in this paper to save space.

5 Analysis and Discussion

This section explores the social integration experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers through a thematic analysis, followed by relevant discussion. The aim, alongside addressing research questions, is to enhance reader comprehension by systematically organizing themes and sub-themes, highlighting the dynamic nature of their migration journey from the initial stages until the interviews were conducted. The following narrative will guide readers through the trajectory of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, shedding light on their interactions with various aspects of state institutions, like-ethnic groups, and local society in Berlin. It also explores their strategies for navigating challenges associated with the asylum process and its constraints.

The analysis commences with the early period of their arrival in Berlin, where they experienced a sense of freedom and joy in expressing their queerness. Subsequently, the narrative shifts to the interactions with state institutions, revealing instances of discrimination and mistreatment based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and refugeeness. The perceptions of service

provision by state institutions are explored, along with the reflections of the target group regarding shortcomings. Furthermore, the experiences of interacting with the ethnic-Georgian communities in Berlin are scrutinized, encompassing encounters with non-queer Georgian immigrants and the complex, multifaceted dynamics of relations with other Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants. The section also addresses the emerging needs arising from these interactions.

The significance of the language is highlighted in a separate theme due to the respondents' extensive emphasis on its importance concerning local society. This theme sets the context for exploring the experiences with the local society in Berlin, including interactions with both non-queer and queer communities, revealing the complexities of their encounters depending on the intersections of multiple identities. While the ambiguous nature of their experiences and perceptions is observed throughout the analysis, this aspect is most pronounced compared to the rest of the analysis. This section ends with a brief paragraph describing their current situation and perspectives for future steps. Finally, strategies for dealing with their situation are addressed under two distinct sub-themes.

To guide the reader further, I developed a map illustrating the sequence and the relationship between themes and sub-themes. Please, check *Appendix 3*.

5.1 A first moment of queer joy

The Western gay liberal discourse captures Europe as “gay-friendly,” which makes LGBTQ+ asylum seekers believe that once they reach those countries, they will forever forget SOGI-related persecution and violence (Shakhsari, 2014, Puar, 2007, cited in Held, 2022). Furthermore, the asylum system operates under the assumption of progress from past oppression to the present liberation of queer asylum seekers (Giametta, 2016, cited in Chossière, 2021). Most participants discussed the current effects of homo/transphobia they had experienced in Georgia. As claimed, they feel free in Berlin, unlike anywhere in Georgia. Moreover, they say it took a while to realize they could express themselves without fear of violence and enjoy their full queerness in Berlin. Thus, the following theme is called: *a first moment of queer joy* and indicates the early experiences and perceptions of the majority of respondents.

When I first came to Berlin, I still had that, the situations there [in Georgia], a moment of tension, but when I gradually looked at the situation and people's attitudes, looks, and similar behavior towards me, I became somehow liberated and felt the way I always wanted to be - free. I used to walk on the street the way I wanted. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

I personally feel comfortable here myself, and therefore when I go out, I go out with a positive attitude, and I'm not afraid. That is, I don't have a thousand thoughts running through my mind... When I was going out, I used to think that I was still in Georgia. But then, I slowly analyzed that that period in my life is over and will never come back because I will never return to Georgia. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

In this section, trans* people seem to benefit the most because, unlike others, trans identity is relatively more difficult to hide. Most trans women lack access to public spaces due to the high risk of harassment and violence in Georgia. Consequently, having access to an environment that is free from the persistent threat of physical violence affords them the freedom to enjoy and celebrate their queerness.

Conversely, quotes from “first moment of queer joy” may contribute to the homonationalist discourse according to which queer asylum seekers, who fled violence and persecution in their home countries, found freedom and happiness in the EU. Although, that is not entirely accurate. Apart from the feeling of safety and confidence to express their SOGI, they face numerous challenges regarding their asylum status and its constraints. In accordance with previous studies (Chossière, 2021; Held, 2022), the current study indicates that the asylum experience in the EU does not provide liberation for LGBTQ+ asylum claimants; rather, it reshapes the oppression and inequality they have faced in their countries of origin. Although most respondents discussed problems related to the asylum procedures, one described it very well while claiming that her migration experience did not improve her life but rather removed a physical threat.

Nothing much has changed; it's just that I'm more comfortable in my women's clothes with makeup on, and I'm not afraid of a rock hitting my back or a bottle hitting my head [by the stranger]. [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

Thus, such lived experiences suggest that asylum-seeking does not liberate them but reshapes their inequalities. Once they start the asylum process, the first moment of queer joy fades away as they encounter complex problems caused by migration policies and procedures. At least two types of marginalization target queer asylum seekers; on the one hand, due to their refugeeness and on the other hand, due to their SOGI characteristics (Chossière, 2021). Although this marginalization can be experienced separately, simultaneously, or intersectionally, that is complex and unique rather than the simple sum of burdens of refugeeness and SOGI.

In the following part of the analysis, I present a wide variety of social integration-related experiences of Georgian queer asylum seekers based on themes that are mostly united under three different indicators of the integration framework's social connections domain.

5.2 Social Links

I enquired interviewees about their interaction experiences with the state institutions. I was mainly interested in their (dis)satisfaction while seeking any assistance from the state, whether they, as queer asylum claimants, had faced negative attitudes, discrimination, or support and understanding from the civil servants in Berlin, Germany. Recent studies with queer asylum seekers in different EU countries show that instead of promised “freedom,” most of the queer asylum claimants describe ambivalent experiences in their host countries (Held, 2022; Chossière, 2021). In my study, all respondents claimed that at this point, the only state institution they have regular interaction with is the State Office for Refugee Issues (LAF), where they receive social assistance payments and other relevant services. Based on their responses, I identified five sub-themes: *Discrimination and mistreatment based on refugeeness*, *Discrimination based on gender identity*, *Adding fuel to the fire: non-queer Georgian asylum seekers at LAF*, *It depends on how you present yourself*, and *I'm not ungrateful, though*.

5.2.1 Discrimination and mistreatment based on refugeeness.

According to Ager and Strang (2008), effective and barrier-free access to the relevant services supports the integration process for refugees. Respondents' experiences suggest that Georgian queer asylum-seekers face numerous obstacles due to their SOGI identity or refugeeness in the accessibility of necessary services. However, linking social capital is not always equally

distributed (Feinstein et al., 2022). The authors argue that gender plays a crucial role in the accessibility of such services (ibid). This is confirmed in this study too. The majority of the respondents reported discriminatory treatment at LAF, either from the social workers or the security guards there. They claim that sometimes discrimination is not direct and visible, but their attitudes make them less worthy.

Too many times, there was a negative attitude. Do they tell you like that?! No, they just make you feel that there is something... how can I say... to put it simply, that you are a refugee, that you are arrival [immigrant], it annoys them. I have had contact with many social workers, and they had a very bad and negative attitude. When I wanted to ask something, they didn't even allow me to ask. They make me leave the room, they bid me farewell... I even sued my social worker because of this attitude in LAF, and then they changed my social worker, and so far, I have a normal social worker. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

She raised her tone aggressively and shouted to me: "I am telling you this is necessary, and I have no supervisor, and she decided to refuse to provide the service"... She didn't even look at my face; she was looking at the computer... I asked to change her, but they didn't change, and she told me: "Not to have such tension between us, bring the [bank] card, and I will transfer [money] to you for the next time." And that's how we finally said goodbye to each other. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

Notwithstanding that the discrimination was more overt against trans* women, the experiences of most respondents suggest that interaction with migration agencies, including LAF, makes them feel unworthy, illegitimate, and insulted due to inappropriate, unwelcoming attitudes and discriminatory treatment. The following quote summarizes their perceptions well.

I really felt that they don't see you as a human. They may talk to you very rudely, look down on you... They think they have the right; because you are a refugee, you are nobody to them. [Respondent 3, a lesbian woman]

Overall, most respondents' experiences propose that the asylum procedures are oppressive. One of them claimed that the procedures usually encourage them to withdraw their asylum application and return to Georgia.

They [migration services] limit your freedom so much and restrict you so much regarding all the documents that [push] you to withdraw [asylum application] and leave the country. [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

Apparently, the experiences of queer asylum seekers are diverse, depending not only on their position within the LGBTQ+ spectrum but other identities/characteristics. For example, while one trans woman was lucky enough to address the problem by filing a complaint within the system, another trans woman could not accomplish the same. Hence, I argue that even though trans* identity seems to be the hardest to negotiate, instead of SOGI, their experiences are largely defined by personal experiences and attributes. This is to say that being trans* does not necessarily place the person in the worst position, as being gay does not necessarily grant privileges to the person within the LGBTQ+ community. The privileges, as well as inequalities, are produced by the complex intersection of many variables.

5.2.2 Discrimination and mistreatment based on gender identity.

Furthermore, more than half of the participants reported transphobic incidents from the LAF staff too. In conjunction with anti-refugee attitudes, transphobic experiences put trans* asylum seekers into a particularly difficult situation. The experiences of trans* respondents suggest that civil servants at LAF often display transphobic attitudes and lack sensitivity and knowledge related to trans topics. While widespread, the quote below illustrates a single case of such discrimination.

I think that she [the social worker] does not recognize me as a woman or as a transgender because I tell her, even when I write in an official email, that I am a transgender woman from Georgia. She replies back: “Mr. [their surname].” I mean, it's a little, I mean, it's offensive because I write you as a woman, and you refer to me as a man in an official letter and in the conversation itself. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

Moreover, many respondents reported transphobic treatment from the security guards at LAF too.

Security might stop you and tell you to go into the men's restroom because your ID says male, not female. This was one instance... I felt insulted during the time I was being

redirected to the [men's] toilet and even had to respond with: "Why do direct me, take me there [men's restroom], when I'm not [man]". [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

Yet another trans woman put their experience into words this way:

Once, I was forbidden to enter the restroom. He was a security guard, and I had an appointment very early, at 8 o'clock, and I ran straight [to the women's restroom]. He told me not to go in there, but I didn't pay attention and just went in. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

The lack of structural response to discriminatory practices at LAF particularly burdens trans* women every time they have regular visits to LAF. Their narrative suggests that such practices result in poor service provision as well as an increased level of stress.

I left the ID card during one of my visits to LAF. And when I returned to pick up this ID card from LAF, and I told the security either to let me in or give it to me... First of all, they didn't give me an ID card. [they told me] "It's not you," because I wore a female outfit [in the ID photo], they did not recognize me. I visited with a different image [from ID photo] and had an argument on this matter: "Why are you assuming my orientation, I want to look like this now and like that the other time". After that, every time I go to LAF, I meet this guard, and I feel that he always has a negative attitude towards me. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Feinstein et al. (2022) stress out that interaction with state institutions for trans* asylum seekers is often stressful and anxious due to the lack of relevant knowledge among administrative workers. Moreover, they are constantly exposed to transphobia throughout different stages of the asylum process. This aligns with the finding of my study. The intersectional analysis of the data suggests that Georgian trans* and gender non-conforming asylum seekers are more likely to face unique intersectional discrimination rather than a simple sum of transphobia and refugee phobia. This results in inadequate service provision that affects the quality of their lives. Moreover, such treatment pushes trans* asylum claimants to isolation and prevents them from integration. All those experiences can result in physical as well as mental health problems.

5.2.3 Adding fuel to the fire: non-queer Georgian asylum seekers at LAF

Some interviewees reported that regardless of neutral/positive experience with LAF staff, the setting of the building and the service provision procedures do not address the special needs of queer people. As claimed by all, they often need to wait for their turn for hours in the waiting room, which is exhausting and unpleasant for them. They are exposed to other Georgian [non-queer] asylum claimants in the waiting room because they all visit the same authority to receive social assistance. Their narrative suggests that even in state institutions, Georgian queer asylum seekers cannot avoid homo/transphobic bullying, threats, and other ill-treatment from fellow Georgians. Trans* asylum claimants are more likely to be exposed to harassment by like-ethnic groups in these spaces too.

If you arrive on time [at LAF], you may have to wait all day. This is an inconvenience, of course. Also, the fact that there may be Georgians around, some [insulting] comments, something... Of course, all this will have a negative impact, whether you want it or not. [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

I had a case where I wanted to, and the social worker was warned [by me] to let me leave early to make it to another appointment. Meanwhile, I waited for him for exactly 7 hours... During that time, I, a transgender woman, was sitting around so many negative [Georgian] people. It meant nothing, right?! [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

In addition, this highlights how much three different pillars (links, bonds, and bridges) of social integration are intertwined with each other. Therefore, their experiences bring forward a need for comprehensive, LGBTQ+, and particularly trans-sensitive (including staff, physical space, etc.) service provision by the relevant authorities to facilitate equitable access to essential services and rights for queer asylum seekers.

5.2.4 “It depends on how you present yourself.”

Almost all the respondents think that interaction experiences vary greatly from case to case. Some of them claimed that the nature of treatment from the LAF staff depends on the individual traits of asylum claimants. The following quote illustrates that well:

I think that they treat us depending on [our] personality. How one [of us] treats social [worker], security [guard]. I believe that society will accept you exactly the way you present yourself. [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

On the one hand, this discourse may fit into the majority narrative, according to which one needs to deserve to be well-treated. Respondents' experiences suggest that there is a tendency among Georgian queer asylum seekers to describe their problems from the micro position and put the emphasis on the individual rather than structural problems. This, of course, hinders them from integrating into a host society. On the other hand, this quote may affirm that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers exhibit multilayer identities (Chossière, 2021) because they experience different kinds of inequalities created by their intersecting identities. As a result, some of them are treated better than others.

Paradoxically, a few respondents described their interaction with LAF employees as explicitly positive. It is worth mentioning that both of those participants identify as gay men. According to them, they have never felt any negativity from either social workers or security guards there; instead, they always felt supported and satisfied with the service provision.

My social worker in LAF, in the housing department, my lawyer there... in short, I have had no problems with the documents regarding my issues. The fact that I couldn't get financial support, the fact that I needed something and could not get it, I have never had a similar case. I am 100 percent satisfied. [Respondent 1, a gay man]

I can't say that anyone treated me aggressively or badly. Rather, very politely. When I go to LAF, they always treat me the best. [Respondent 4, a gay man]

This is by no means to argue that all gay men are in a favorable position compared to other sub-groups within the LGBTQ+ community. Instead, it confirms that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers' experiences with state institutions vary significantly due to their multilayer identities. In this case, the positive treatment can be the result of the privilege of being straight-passing¹⁰.

¹⁰ Holding the queer identity in a way that no one assumes the person is queer and/or outside of heteronormativity.

Thus, the satisfactory encounters of these gay men do not guarantee that all gay men will have the same experiences.

5.2.5 “I'm not ungrateful, though.”

Despite the challenges mentioned above, all the respondents keep moving toward improved conditions and integration. Based on their responses, the final theme identified in this section is *I'm not ungrateful, though*. The sense of gratitude varies depending on their socio-economic background. Regardless of many problems and challenges, about half of the group is grateful for the fact that they are provided with shelter and food, which in some cases prevents them from engagement in survival sex work. The data suggests that those, who tend to feel grateful, were engaged in sex work or did not have any income rather than begging in the streets.

Although there are problems here too, there are other kinds of problems here... I was given a shelter, which I didn't have. I was given food, which I didn't have in Georgia, security, peace, and the opportunity to feel human, that is, to be reborn. In Georgia, I survived the wave of homophobia... I will be killed there. Whom should I let kill me?! I'm going to stay here. [Respondent 4, a gay man]

Here, I felt human. I will not return now... There is only one way; in Georgia, you have to work as a sex worker anyway. What does this mean?! I do not understand. Everything is financed here: the shelter, medical services, everything in general. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

These quotes underline the precarious situation faced by asylum seekers. Despite mental health deteriorating instances of discrimination and ill-treatment within the host country, some of them exhibit feelings of gratitude for being able to fulfill fundamental necessities, which were unattainable in Georgia. On the contrary, some express gratitude because of the possibilities for personal and professional development. Their experiences suggest that for the sake of a better future, they accept challenging reality and feel thankful for the minimum support. The quote from one of the interviewees digests this idea well.

They finance you, feed you. I don't know whether it's bad food or good, you eat it. Right? I don't know; I'm not ungrateful, though. I appreciate what they do for me. I want to stay here, for example. Because I feel supported even though some people made

mistakes. I have a goal to learn the language, get a job, and become independent.
[Respondent 3, a lesbian woman]

To go further, this quote affirms the feeling of illegitimacy and vulnerability, which most LGBTQ+ asylum seekers need to go through. Moreover, respondents' experiences suggest that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers struggle to claim their rights and advocate for better policies due to the repressive asylum system and its constraints alongside past oppression experiences from the country of their origin.

Therefore, the theme: *I am not ungrateful, though* describes the respondents' precarious condition caused by inequalities in their country of origin as well as different forms of oppression during the asylum process, which enable them to appreciate little things such as shelter and food (no matter in what conditions and quality). Apparently, the social integration-related experiences of Georgian queer asylum seekers are diverse and ambivalent, rich with negative and positive events. Despite, as they claim, they get along with difficulties for the sake of a better future.

5.3 Social Bonding

The next section examines the social bonding of the respondents and describes their interaction experiences with other Georgians in Berlin. I divided questions related to respondents' experiences of interaction with Georgians into two parts: non-queer Georgians and queer Georgians living in Berlin in order to understand their encounters better. I identified several themes in this part: *Georgian will always remain Georgian*, *The power of being among similar others until disputes emerge*, *Not so safe space*, *Community within the community*, and *Dreaming of an apartment*.

5.3.1 “Georgian will always remain Georgian.”

Scholars argue that having connections with people of the same ethnic background provides advantages for asylum seekers. Refugees who do not have contact with like-ethnic communities are three-four times more likely to suffer from depression in comparison with those who have access to such resources (Beiser, 1993, cited in Ager and Strang, 2008). However, such interactions can be equally empowering and revoking, depending on numerous

circumstances. For example, the experiences of my respondents suggest that Georgian queer asylum seekers encounter SOGI-related harassment and violence from fellow Georgians in Berlin. Most of them claimed they faced homo/transphobia right from the beginning of their asylum application. A recent study shows that 65% of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants experienced discrimination in the host country (Andrade et al., 2020). Respondents of my study were first placed in the regular refugee shelters, where they were accommodated together with other Georgians, from whom they experienced bullying, threats, fear of violence, and constant insecurity.

I had my first fight when I was living in the asylum request department. When someone entered my space and threw my coffee and sugar around and laid on my bed... Those were Georgians, and there was a lot of abuse from there... As they say, you cannot “fix” Georgians anywhere. [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

I can remember one fact, my friends and I were going to the club, and some Georgians were also going, who were homophobic towards us, and once they were talking about something in the subway... “Are you men or women” They were improvising the Georgian¹¹ situation. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

Simply, they even have a problem with the fact that I wear this earring; they even comment on it. That is, no matter where a Georgian is, whether in Europe or not, they will always remain a Georgian and will always have a negative attitude towards the people of our [LGBTQ+] community. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

I acknowledge that naming the theme “Georgian will always remain Georgian” poses a risk of reproducing a very general image of Georgians that is aggressive and homophobic. Of course, this is neither my goal nor the reality. In the framework by Ager & Strang (2008), they argue that having a good relationship with your ethnic community is an important aspect of integration. It is in this context that these experiences become important to portray since they probably affect the possibilities for Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers to search for support in this community. Therefore, I decided to keep the name for this theme to authentically capture

¹¹ Creating the same homo/transphobic environment as one in Georgia

the interaction dynamics between Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants and fellow non-queers. These people feel anger and a lack of trust toward them because of bullying and discrimination in Georgia and Germany, which makes their integration process more difficult.

In addition, even from the quotes, it is clear that trans* people are more likely to experience discrimination and maltreatment from their ethnic communities too. That does not necessarily mean that Georgians are more likely to be transphobic than homophobic. The data suggests that the reason can be the fact that trans* identity tends to be more visible than other identities. For example, one interviewee argued that she had no negative incidents in the regular shelter because she hid her sexual orientation.

They are quite homophobic, in the shelter I didn't talk about my [sexual] orientation at all, it was out of the question, only one person knew, one Georgian girl. The rest didn't... I knew that if I told them about my orientation, their attitude would change and I would become, I don't know, non-human. But when you don't tell them anything, they treat you normally and they can help you in everything, as Georgians are used to. That is, for them, humanity ends where their homophobia begins. If you wake up a homophobe in them, they can kill you. [Respondent 3, a lesbian woman]

This quote shows the ambivalence of being straight-passing. On the one hand, which can be the privilege that grants a person security and opportunity for social bonding. On the other hand, it can put them in a vulnerable position and encourage them to remain in the closet¹². Remarkably, respondents' experiences suggest that hiding is the key strategy to keep themselves safe from discrimination and violence. However, trans* women are most unlikely to benefit from the privilege of being hidden, which makes their condition more vulnerable. Moreover, similar to them, anyone within LGBTQ+ who does not fit into heteronormativity might be deprived of these privileges. This again shows the relevance of adopting an intersectional lens to these processes.

¹² Not sharing or hiding one's sexuality and/or gender identity with others.

5.3.2 The power of being among similar others until disputes emerge.

The next theme I identified in this section is *the power of being among similar others until disputes emerge*. Most LGBTQ+ asylum seekers fled from their country of origin due to violence, persecution, and threats while hoping that seeking asylum in the “gay-friendly” EU would grant them a feeling of safety. However, one previous research showed that more than 40% of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants felt unsafe in their accommodations during the asylum process (Andrade et al., 2020). Therefore, to address their needs and provide a safe space, having particularly LGBTQ+ shelter is paramount. In line with previous research, most respondents of my study described feeling relieved once they moved to the LGBTQ+ refugee shelter, where, as claimed by most, they could express themselves without fear.

By the way, I was very surprised that only LGBTQ people live in this particular shelter, and for me, it was somehow a relief... I couldn't live among heterosexuals in any way. I couldn't play anymore because I myself had such a period, now I'm 25 years old, and I know exactly what I want and don't want, and I won't hide my real situation and thoughts. It's very important. [Respondent 1, a gay man]

The confinement, that there I am not what I really am. Because I think that I should not accidentally say something to cause aggression. I'm not tense here, I feel good here. When I came here to the shelter, I breathed a sigh of relief. [Respondent 3, a lesbian woman]

I lived in Georgia for 26 years, and I felt everything in 1 year here that I could not feel for 26 years in Georgia... Here, I felt like a human being. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

The LGBTQ+ refugee shelter becomes the first place where the asylum seekers felt safe to express their full selves without fear of persecution. A place where anyone is encouraged to express their sexual orientation or gender identity with dignity and pride. This shows the degree of importance for them to claim their queer identity. An intersectional analysis of gender identity and sexual orientation suggests that, specifically, LGBTQ+ refugee shelter benefits everyone within the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

However, compared with most respondents, one claimed he could not fully express himself and practice his religion. One previous research (Selim et al., 2022) showed how LGBTQ+ asylum seekers who claim to be religious encounter greater challenges. Based on several previous research, the authors argue that, on the one hand, it seems incompatible with the authorities while seeking asylum. On the other hand, it can cause cognitive dissonance for the religious LGBTQ+ individuals themselves. In my research, the respondent felt confident with his homosexual and religious identities. Moreover, he did not face any challenges with the migration authorities. However, he feels discriminated against among LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. The respondents' experiences refer to peer pressure, which forces the residents to follow some informal rules. The quote below is a good example of that.

This dress [religious outfit] annoys them, just like my beard annoys them now, and they tell me to shave it or dye it yellow... they tell me, “If you don't wear that dress, we'll write a complaint, we'll all go to the management together, we'll write a statement that you don't fit into the general framework, and they'll kick you out of the shelter”. [Respondent 4, a gay man]

From the intersectional perspective, I can argue that regardless of safe space, LGBTQ+ individuals with Orthodox faith are discriminated against to some extent. This can be explained by the historical events of the Georgian Orthodox Church leading the homophobic movement/discourse in Georgia, which could have traumatized many LGBTQ+ individuals. However, this is by no means to justify such treatment but to show that for the many Georgian queer asylum seekers being LGBTQ+ and Christian Orthodox seems incompatible in that context. Hence, peer pressure negatively affects relationship dynamics within the LGBTQ+ refugee shelter.

Despite all, these indicate that amidst differences related to the multiple intersecting identities of the LGBTQ+ asylum claimants, emerging disputes can jeopardize their common safe space.

5.3.3 Not-so-safe space.

Speaking of peer pressure, I will move on to the final theme of this section, *not-so-safe space*. Even though most interviewees agreed that they felt relief since they moved into the LGBTQ+ shelter, they still discussed conflict situations among Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in

the LGBTQ+ refugee shelter. The majority of them recalled conflict incidents within the Georgian queer community that, as they say, negatively affected their well-being.

It only makes me emotional; otherwise... they often denigrate each other in terms of some visual aspect, some health condition; They demean each other, which is more LGBTQ+ problems, even visual, even some insecurities that they have. They tease each other and make fun of each other and get energy from that. [Respondent 1, a gay man]

Unfortunately, in our community, they fight each other, and it affects me. I hear things like daily tensions with each other, broken relationships, etc. I always think that we are asking for asylum in another country and talking about being fought [by homophobic groups] over there, etc. I mean, we, the [LGBTQ+] community members, are doing the same here in this country where we have claimed asylum. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

Held (2022) stresses that, like other refugees, LGBTQ+ asylum claimants are significantly affected by the coercive asylum system, which puts them into shared, overcrowded accommodations where people lack privacy and are obliged to follow strict rules and regulations. Similarly, none of the respondents in my study chose to be accommodated together; instead, the institution put them together in this shelter. As a result, a safe space, where they first felt relief, becomes a not-so-safe space due to conflicts with each other, mostly triggered by a lack of privacy and other shelter setting-related constraints.

Unfortunately, limited obtained data does not allow me to provide an intersectional analysis of this aspect within the target group. Nevertheless, from a theoretical perspective, I argue that the disputes and the unity between Georgian queer asylum seekers largely affect their well-being. In addition, as stated above, lack of interaction with like-ethnic groups can lead to depression and other health-related problems, which are evident in the next sections of this document.

That is why some say they avoid unnecessary interactions with fellow Georgians in the LGBTQ+ shelter because of the negative experiences. I have observed that Georgian queer asylum seekers tend to display predominantly unfavorable descriptors when referring to their fellow Georgians, despite their multifaceted experiences rather than exclusively negative.

Indeed, the support and solidarity between each other are typically manifested upon their initial arrival at the LGBTQ+ shelter. Though, respondents' experiences suggest that as time progresses and they contend with the difficulties associated with asylum-seeking as well as a deprivation of personal space, interpersonal conflicts often emerge. Unfortunately, these frictions are frequently directed at one another rather than the institutions and policies that cause their problems. Among many, this quote is just a single manifestation of such practices.

I always avoid communication with Georgians, even though I have to, and I have many LGBTQ friends here. Because Georgian LGBTQ people are, to say it directly and rudely, evil, and envious. Because I have had many cases and experiences, even Georgians cut my wig... [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Those asylum seekers, who arrived early, can be “migration experts” for the newcomers (Ludwig, 2016, cited in Chossière, 2021). They can provide valuable information and advice on the asylum procedures as they have already gone through it and gained knowledge as well as useful contacts (ibid). Despite acknowledging the importance of such support, some respondents claimed that one of the reasons they distance themselves from fellow Georgians is the incorrect guidance received from the “migration experts” to have intentionally created further barriers for them.

Distance from local [living in Berlin] Georgians, mostly because, I don't know... They are not happy when someone goes ahead [have some success] and something. Such very funny things. We are from the same country, we have something in common, that we are people of a [LGBTQ+] community, and we should understand each other... we should support each other... but unfortunately, this does not happen because they cannot understand it... [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

Moreover, the respondents' experiences suggest that there is a constant dispute on who deserves to receive refugee status among them. A few of them expressed anger toward those Georgian LGBTQ+ individuals who sought asylum in Berlin, Germany, despite, according to them, not having an urgent need to leave the country of origin. One respondent claimed that such cases negatively affect those who have a real need to remain in refuge.

Why did you run away if you did not find it difficult to adapt in Georgia and you could work well? If you were not working as a sex worker in Georgia, why did you run away? Why did you take refuge in Berlin? You make things difficult for me. Aren't you?
[Respondent 6, a trans woman]

This is yet another demonstration of how Georgian queer asylum seekers neglect discussion on the structural problems of asylum claimants and put the blame on each other. Instead of problematizing the government policies related to refugees and supporting each other by discussing the “legitimacy” of asylum-seeking, they tend to compete against each other to be able to remain in Germany. There can be several reasons for this: first, they cannot focus on the wider picture of the situation to analyze and criticize the policies and structural constraints due to their personal problems caused by administrative procedures, which put them in a vulnerable position. Secondly, they may lack the relevant knowledge to challenge the existing structures or policies related to asylum processes and refugee integration.

Notably, merely one interviewee described explicitly positive interactions with other Georgians within the LGBTQ+ refugee shelter. Predictably, based on demographic data, this participant is the most recent arrival and had spent only a couple of months in the shelter at the time of the interviews. Therefore, the experiences of most respondents suggest that her experience will also change over time. However, during the interview, she claimed that positive attitudes and dynamics play a crucial role in her well-being, aligning with previous studies' findings (e.g., Alessi et al., 2018).

I have a very good relationship with everyone in the shelter as well. Because I have my traumas, these people have their traumas, and we empathize with each other and understand each other. Here I don't feel in danger with these people; they understand me, and as far as I'm a little depressed, it's good that I'm in communication with someone. I am always communicating here, and it helps. [Respondent 3, a lesbian woman]

5.3.4 Community within the community.

There can be divisions created between like-ethnic refugees based on their values, particular life experiences, or any other characteristics (Feinstein et al., 2022). In this study, even those

participants who reported negative interaction experiences with fellow queer Georgians at the shelter claimed that, regardless of the general negative environment, they have a very small circle of Georgian queer friends with whom they spend time. Their experiences suggest that such small communities facilitate supporting each other and smoothing the integration process. Therefore, I decided to create a sub-theme: *Community within the community*.

We are several, 5-6 people who are together 24/7, live in one room, and have a family situation. We have created an environment where you cannot feel bad. That is, it is a harmonious environment, and all this helps us to pass the period of cohabitation and difficult paths to integration, even getting a personal space, an apartment, etc. We have fun, we cook Georgian cuisine, we get together, and that's how we spend our days.
[Respondent 2, a trans woman]

When the New Year was coming... one of them called me that “we, Georgians, are gathering on the fourth floor; we have set the table and invited you.” And when I asked how much money I should deposit, [they told me] “You don't want anything; you are invited.” I arrived, and there was a nice feast... It was good to have fun; there was a kind of feast. I also felt moral support; they helped me, taught me the way: “You should go there, there you have to go that way.” They assisted me to the shops... [Respondent 4, a gay man]

Asylum seekers usually have ambivalent experiences with like-ethnic groups (Chossière, 2021). Georgians seem not to be the exception in this regard. Their narrative proposes that despite disagreements, there are moments of happiness and togetherness they share with each other, especially during the holidays or birthday celebrations. Apparently, they can get along with each other and put their problems aside, but structural problems keep them confronting one another over and over.

5.3.5 Dreaming of an apartment

Since most of the participants reported conflict relationships within the Georgian queer community at the LGBTQ+ refugee shelter, I asked all of them about their perception of the causes of the problem. The experiences of most of them suggest that the most crucial factor that triggers conflicts is how the shelter is designed and operated. Namely, among distinct

reasons, respondents mainly mentioned the lack of privacy. They are exposed to each other rather than unseen. In the shelter, they need to be transparent about everything, which leads to numerous problems. Hence, I identified yet another sub-theme: *dreaming of an apartment*, which captures the consequences of deprived space and the need to move out.

Now the situation has changed, the issue of the apartment has been resolved. We [me and my partner] were in different rooms and did not have our privacy, and this was very stressful for both of us... We have joint plans [when we move into the apartment] and then learning the language, professional developments and what's more, calmness and... [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

There are also representatives of other countries with us [in the room]; we are not only Georgians. And my mind gets confused when I study... I need personal space, not only for studying but for everything. If I don't have personal space, I am very superficial towards everything. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

I will get a separate apartment and live in that separate apartment as I want. I will decide whether I will walk in a dress or naked. This will improve this situation. They don't like me here in a [religious] dress; they don't like me without dress; what should I do?! They don't like me walking with a beard. Should I dance to everyone's tap?! [Respondent 4, a gay man]

Even though I focus on the Social Connections of the integration framework in this research project, the respondents' experiences showed that all the domains of that framework are interconnected, making it impossible to avoid discussion on housing from Means and Marker's domain. During the interviews, most respondents touched upon almost all domains regarding their integration. For instance, they extensively discussed the housing problem. This is a shred of good evidence for me to argue that for the successful integration of refugees, there is a need for a comprehensive approach that requires the involvement of different stakeholders.

In addition, most of them believe that having an apartment is a source to become freer and more independent to improve their conditions. Indeed, Feinstein et al. (2022) reviewed previous studies on this matter, according to which housing plays an essential role in practicing basic rights and receiving services in addition to improved physical and mental health

outcomes. Correspondingly, housing seems such a prominent issue for the participants of my study that they envision it as yet another chapter for their asylum journey. Overall, their experiences indicate that after claiming their queer identity at the shelter, diverse needs emerge, which require moving out from there.

When I'm here, I'm who I really am; I will wear a dress or whatever I want. However, along with that, I also need personal space that will solve many problems. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Most participants also discussed the challenging process of receiving a separate apartment from the state. According to them, it is a long and exhausting process full of difficulties. Likewise, Feinstein et al. (2022) stressed out that refugees face tremendous obstacles in finding apartments due to landlords' prejudiced attitudes in Germany. In addition, there is a long queue for private apartments, and the only shortcut to apartment allocation remains to prove an urgent need for that. Therefore, some participants described some procedures they had gone through to accelerate the waiting period. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee of obtaining an apartment anytime soon.

It was a very difficult process. You must submit all the reasons, health reports from the doctor, psychological report, etc., that you actually, there is such a protocol, have to meet the criteria of this protocol to get an apartment according to the protocol... You have to wait a long time; actually, this is the moment. And after nine months, something worked out for me... [Respondent 1, a gay man]

Overall, the last four themes, on the one hand, highlight the advantages of living with other LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in contrast with living in regular refugee shelters, and on the other hand, draw attention to the shortcomings of such a kind of cohabitation and highlight the need for tailored housing for asylum seekers.

5.4 The importance of the language.

I also examined the social bridging process of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. I asked the interviewees about their interaction experiences with the local society in Berlin. To obtain more detailed information, I enquired participants separately about interaction with the local non-

queer and queer community. However, prior to social bridging, I decided to address the language issue because the participants extensively discussed language knowledge from the facilitators' domain as a primary source to interact with the local society. Like most refugees, all participants mentioned difficulties in learning a new language. Their experiences suggest that not knowing the German language results in the lack of direct, meaningful interaction with the local society in Berlin. This is yet another proof of how intertwined different domains of integration framework are. Although the participants mentioned that the German government provides free, good-quality language courses, which are free from discrimination, more than half of them claimed, housing problems make it difficult to attend language classes. This issue transcends the focus of this study, which is why I will not go into further detail. Despite this, it effectively showcases how language can hinder the social bridging process between queer asylum seekers and the receiving society. Many of them claim that they mostly have superficial conversations or interactions with non-queer locals, mostly in public transport, streets, parks, or any other public spaces.

Because I don't know the language, naturally I won't be able to communicate and make friends with the local people, yet. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

So far, I can't tell you that I have had a lot [of interaction with locals]; I have a barrier because I don't know the language. [Respondent 3, a lesbian girl]

I won't be able to make friends physically; now, communication via [google] translate is a bit of a topic. [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

From the intersectional lenses, those respondents who can speak English are more likely to establish some relationships with local society in Berlin. Those who speak only Georgian tend to be isolated from the local social life; instead, they spend more time with fellow queer Georgians. Likewise, similar studies with refugees show that language significantly facilitates the social integration of asylum seekers as well as access to various services and rights (Ager and Strang, 2008). Thus, the social inclusion of those Georgian queer asylum-seekers is delayed. Furthermore, such circumstances encourage the othering process of asylum seekers from the local society.

5.5 Social Bridges / Ambiguous Encounters

Apart from the language-related theme, a long process of coming back and forth between the data led me to develop one overarching theme: *Ambiguous Encounters*, which itself unites several sub-themes: *Not so safe public sphere*, *Homophobic immigrants*, *Discrimination based on refugeeness: towards another closet?! and An effect of being nice*. These themes cover most experiences of the research participants with the local society in Berlin, which can be described as ambivalent.

5.5.1 Not-so-safe public sphere.

In this study, some claimed they have experienced harassment based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, even though Germany is a developed country with progressive legislation. Moreover, some of them reported intimidation incidents based on their refugeeness too. Although, the respondents' overall narrative suggests that the interaction experiences of LGBTQ+ with the local society are complex and ambivalent, mostly occurring in public spaces such as public transport, parks, streets, etc. Some of them report discrimination or harassment experiences based on refugeeness. This quote below captures one such incident.

While I was on the bus [I had a negative incident], this also happened on the bus; “these asylum claimants are arriving...,” and there were some such conversations. “They ask [for asylum], they don't do anything; that's how they want to live at the expense of the state.” [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Moreover, some respondents, like her, also reported SOGI-related harassment. The quote below illustrates the negative affect of multiple, intersecting discrimination on trans* women.

Despite being a peaceful country [Germany], there are still people who will always oppose the members of our orientation [LGBTQ+] community... There was also a case here, once my friend [name of the friend] and I were crossing the road, and a local person pushed me with his shoulder, not by chance, but on purpose. However, I didn't respond because I wanted to avoid conflict. There were such cases, and it is precisely because of similar cases that I could not figure out what I want [in life] for this stage. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

The interviewees' experiences suggest that queer asylum seekers and particularly trans asylum seekers are vulnerable in the face of discrimination based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or refugeeness. The public space is not completely safe for them. To get back to the last quote, like respondent 7, many other respondents reported trying to avoid conflicts in the host country. On the one hand, some argued that it is because of their traumatic experiences in Georgia, while others said that they do it because they do not have confrontational character. The avoidance of conflict and being silenced can be related to not only previous experiences of SOGI-related violence but to the “feeling of insecurity and illegitimacy” of refugeeness, which produces “self-censorship” among LGBTQ+ asylum claimants (Chossière, 2021). Therefore, conflict avoidance can be the result of the powerless position they are placed in by the system. Moreover, self-censorship can push queer asylum seekers to isolate themselves. Which, of course, may avoid conflicts but will hinder their integration.

Firstly, I don't go anywhere alone, I always go out with my friends. I don't know, I haven't... There could have been something like [a negative experience] that, but I'm the kind of person who doesn't get involved in conflict... I don't notice anymore... It is more related to the past. No matter which country I live in, that past trauma still haunts me, even if I am in America. [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

On the contrary, some respondents also recalled positive experiences from the local society. They claimed that they had some incidents when people from local society confronted their fellow citizens to defend them from SOGI-related harassment. One of the quotes is provided below.

I had a case when I was traveling on the subway where a man who visually appeared to be German insulted us [because of trans* identity]; he was not an immigrant and was not a refugee like me. But again, a lady sitting next to him protected us - several trans* people. [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

Overall, the respondents' experiences indicate the ambiguousness of Georgian queer asylum seekers' encounters with the local society in Berlin. Their experiences are neither explicitly positive nor negative. Instead, their lived experiences in the host country are complex, diverse, and individual. Complex intersecting identities and past experiences determine the outcome of their interactions. However, public, and private spaces apparently lack safety for the Georgian

queer asylum seekers in Berlin. While they do not have private space at all, even public space remains to lack safety for them, which puts them in an even more vulnerable position.

5.5.2 Homophobic immigrants.

The respondents' experiences suggest that even knowledge of the English language facilitates deeper interaction with the local community in Berlin. Most of them claimed they feel positive attitudes toward their sexual orientation or gender identity from the locals. In contrast, about half of the respondents, mostly trans* women claim that they have experienced aggression mostly from other foreigners.

The fact that I am transgender was accepted quite well, and neither my dress nor my makeup was unusual for them. I don't really like to walk [and dress] provocatively by myself, and I'll emphasize that; but they accepted me normally, steadily; that is, they always thought I was an ordinary lady passing by. There was more aggression in this community again and again from Arab or Syrian, or Turkish men and women. And I felt what I once felt in Georgia at every step. [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

There are a lot of refugees here, Arabs, etc., maybe there was a look or a gaze or something [harassment, negative experience] from someone's side, but it didn't escalate... Turks and Arabs don't like it [my gender identity] anyway. I know Turkish, I can understand the conversation. [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

Among the Arabs, are more negative towards the representatives of our community. I felt something like that... He threw a lighter, and as we passed by, he kind of threw it at us. A friend knows a little bit of the language, she has lived here for a long time, and she fought with him; She defended herself and defended me. They were Arabs, arrivals [immigrants] because they seemed so; they spoke Arabic. Again, there was a problem with arrivals [immigrants]. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

These quotes show how the respondents' experiences differ across the LGBTQ+ spectrum and how trans* asylum seekers are more likely to experience discrimination and ill-treatment. Apart from this, as with the analysis above regarding the respondent's description of the Georgian community and Georgians, they expressed having met negative and discriminatory behavior from other minority groups, especially Arabs. On the one hand, one could argue that the

respondents were attempting to conform to the dominant narrative fueled by the liberal, "LGBTQ+-friendly" West, which characterizes the East as homophobic and repressive and views Muslim refugees as dangerous. To further clarify their reasoning, I asked each respondent to explain how they identified individuals as "Arab" or "Muslim." The majority of them attributed this identification to language or appearance, the latter being a somewhat stereotypical assumption. Concerning that, it becomes important to note that previous studies have revealed that Islamophobia exists within the LGBTQ+ community (Held, 2022). On the other hand, the respondents' usage of these terms still reflects their actual experiences of homo/transphobia in Berlin. Just as described above, this shows how their encounters and possible relationships with the local non-queer community in Berlin are affected by these experiences or expectations (Ager & String, 2008).

Paradoxically, a few respondents reported positive interaction experiences with some immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds in Berlin. In the following quote, one describes the importance of this kind of support.

Like us, he was an arrival [immigrant], a refugee, but he has been living here for 15 years. He is heterosexual... and gave me a lot of advice. He offered all kinds of help. That is, by help, I mean if I had any problem with integration or if I needed some help with communicating with someone [German speaking]... and something... He offered me everything and supported me. Positive things like that are more important today, I realized, to find ourselves where we are. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Apart from facilitating smoother integration, social bonding of such kind can ensure economic benefits in the long run for the asylum seekers in a host country (Ager and Strang, 2008).

5.5.3 Discrimination based on refugeehood – towards another closet?!

Many respondents have some socialization experience with the local queer community, mostly at queer spaces such as cafes, bars, clubs, etc. Although they describe their experiences with them as very positive, understanding, and supportive, some of them claim they have been subjected to negative treatment based on their refugeehood. Their experiences propose that the ambiguity of their situation results from being in between so many positions due to their refugeehood and queerness at the same time. Hence, they constantly need to negotiate their

different identities to stay safe at the expense of hiding some aspects of their identity. The quote below describes the experience of a trans* woman in the queer socialization space.

I met someone, and he asked me who I was... then he looked at me and said, "They cut my money [taxes] so that you eat well." [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

This quote shows the ambivalence of the queer safe spaces for LGBTQ+ asylum claimants. On the one hand, they have a safe space to express themselves as LGBTQ+ individuals. However, on the other hand, they can be subjected to harassment and discrimination because of their refugeeness. These attitudes push them to hide their identity as asylum seekers. Likewise, this aligns with the findings of the recent study of queer asylum seekers and refugees in Paris (Chossière, 2021).

Moreover, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers struggle to build romantic relationships with local queer community members, largely because of the stigma of refugeeness. The challenges include dehumanization and power imbalance between them and potential partners (Chossière, 2021). In addition, queer asylum claimants are seen as dependent on others, "victims," and ones looking for a relationship to get citizenship (Held, 2022). Some respondents also describe similar challenges to building relationships in Berlin:

When he [the guy I met] found out that I seek asylum, you know what kind of moment it was? He had a little aggression about "I work, and I pay [taxes] for you." [Respondent 1, a gay man]

There was a case, now I remember, that I had this correspondence [on Grindr¹³): "Where do you live, what are you doing here" ... and when he started talking to me about something... when I told him that I have arrived and seek for asylum and that I specifically live in a shelter, for some reason he stopped talking. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

Their experiences suggest that such anti-refugee attitudes among the receiving queer society intensify the othering process of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and pose significant challenges to

¹³ A dating application usually for gay, bisexual men, trans* women and queer people.

integration. That is why some respondents claimed that they decided not to disclose their identity as asylum seekers; instead, they present themselves, for example, as tourists.

I told many people that I do not live here and am a tourist; that is, I did not directly say that I am a refugee here and seeking asylum... It may upset people that I came here from another country, [that] I am an asylum seeker; I have hidden it too many times. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Overall, the experiences of most respondents suggest that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are pushed towards another closet in order not to be harassed and excluded. While it can help them avoid unpleasant interactions and mal-treatment, the pressure of being hidden in a closet poses a significant risk to the mental health of those asylum claimants.

In contrast with other studies with refugees, most of the interviewees did not report discrimination or any negative attitudes from the receiving society based on their country of origin. Only one of them mentioned that a negative perception of Georgians among the local community in Berlin also affects them.

They do not have a good attitude towards Georgians because they steal, all of them. Mostly because of that [I have been subjected to a dismissive attitude]. A lot of people have told me that. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

Despite not having explicit experiences of racism, being an asylum seeker and refugee can be closely tied up with racialization, which boosts exclusion and othering processes (Chossière, 2021). The experiences of Georgian queer asylum claimants propose that their refugeeness intensifies their exclusion and othering process even though they do not report discriminatory treatment based on their ethnicity or country of origin.

Speaking of othering processes and exclusion related to refugeeness, one of the respondents claimed that all asylum seekers are given only a green folder at LAF to keep their documents. She claimed that she always felt weird whenever she was using public transport with that folder. It was only later that she found out it was related to that green folder given to every refugee. Hence, her narrative suggests that the system uses a green folder as a symbol for othering asylum seekers and refugees from the rest of society.

I felt discomfort whenever I was on the subway with this green folder. I can't explain it to you; for some reason, I feel nationalism when everyone looks at you and realizes that you are a refugee. I changed the folder because I didn't want everyone to know that I am a refugee. They give us, and everyone has a green folder. Do you hear me? Every refugee has a green folder. [Respondent 3, a lesbian woman]

Maybe it is unintentional; however, this is an example of the institutionalized othering process by attributing a common symbol to all the asylum seekers. It strengthens the feeling of non-belonging among queer asylum seekers in Berlin. Nevertheless, respondents' actions suggest that queer asylum seekers avoid being subjected to such processes by using different strategies, such as changing the folder or hiding their refugee status or SOGI, tailored to certain situations.

5.5.4 An effect of being nice

Turning now to positive interaction experiences, most respondents claim they have felt support from the local queer community. Although they struggled to recall any specific examples of such support, they felt encouraged to see solidarity from the local queer community. The quotes below illustrate the nature of such support.

To whom I said that I am here for the refugee issue, they offer me a lot of help and [told me], “If you need anything, we can help you.” [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

I have two [trans] people whom I have met here so far. I have a very good relationship [with them]. They support me if I ask for anything related to trans issues. [Respondent 6, a trans woman]

Remarkably, positive experiences with a local queer community consider mostly not displaying anti-refugee attitudes and expressing verbal support through promises. Actually, that is why I decided to name this theme as an effect of being nice. By simply being nice, the local queer community can make queer asylum seekers feel accepted and welcomed.

The fact that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants characterize support from the local queer community very positively, despite its mostly shallow nature, may indicate their feeling of illegitimacy. Their precarious situation makes them appreciate little things, such as the absence of anti-refugee statements or conflicts. Paradoxically, the integration framework (Ager and Strang,

2008) suggests that even such minimal positive interactions noticeably contribute to asylum claimants' feelings of safety and belonging. Regardless, for the integration means, more meaningful interactions are needed (ibid).

Conversely, there are cases of more meaningful support and acts of solidarity too. However, only a few respondents reported such encounters. For example, one interviewee, a gay man, described a specific example of such support, which, as he claimed, was crucial to him.

I had moments, generally here, in the shelter, [when] you don't want to stay, and you don't have anyone [to stay over]. And when a stranger tells you, "My house is always open for you, let's watch [movie], talk, do everything." Of course, it helps me psychologically and morally in every way. [Respondent 1, a gay man]

Speaking of ambivalent experiences of queer asylum seekers, here comes the question of whether it is just the goodwill of a stranger to support asylum seekers, or do they expect anything in return? I tried to investigate this topic further during the interviews because, according to previous research (Held, 2022), the nature of such support can be exploitative. For example, in exchange for minimal support, privileged white gay men may sexually exploit queer asylum seekers or refugees in vulnerable situations (ibid). However, the respondents of this research did not confirm such experiences. Besides, most respondents positively described their interactions with the local queer community in the context of the local LGBTQ+ groups and organizations. I decided to focus on these aspects in the next section because they are mostly related to various support services for handling obstacles and stress during the asylum process.

6 Strategies to Handle the Situation.

In addition, I asked the interviewees if there had been an individual or organization from which they received crucial support and how they dealt with the challenges during the asylum process. The participants provided limited strategies and opportunities for dealing with stress and other difficulties. Consequently, I identified two major themes in this part: *Escape and Reliance*.

6.1 Reliance

One recent report on the survey “Queering Asylum in Europe” revealed that LGBTQ+ asylum claimants receive support and services predominantly from LGBTQ+ organizations in destination countries (Andrade et al., 2020). In my study, many respondents reported reaching out to different LGBTQ+ organizations to deal with their stress and other problems related to the asylum process. One can argue that these organizations are part of the local queer community; in that sense, they cannot be the strategy. Following that logic, many of those organizations receive funding either from local or federal governments, which gives the ground to argue that these organizations are part of the state institutions in this context. Regardless, I argue that placing these organizations in this section of the report puts the emphasis not on these organizations but on the respondents of my research, who reported their reliance on them in dealing with challenges.

Many participants mentioned Schwulenberatung Berlin¹⁴ regarding handling difficulties during the asylum process and addressing some of their needs. This organization operates the queer refugee shelter alongside different kinds of service provision, such as psychological, legal, and health-related, in different locations in Berlin.

I used to go to the psychologist [at Schwulenberatung Berlin], and it helped me in so many ways when I first arrived [in Berlin]. I was still new here, and I was feeling very lonely... [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

Some mentioned TransInterQueer¹⁵, which provides various services, particularly to trans*, intersex, and queer people. One respondent, who identifies as a questioning, claimed that this organization addresses their needs and supports them in the best manner.

I go to psychologists, and they help me to find and integrate myself, to be here freely, and to be who I really am. I am very free, and we have such conversations as if I talk with my friends, very open conversations; and when I leave there, I am charged with very positive emotions, and these emotions follow me for a very long time, and it really

¹⁴ Berlin-based LGBTQ+ organization, which operates the LGBTQ+ refugee shelter.

¹⁵ Berlin-based community organization which works specifically with trans*, intersex and queer individuals.

affects me because that person has a great influence on me. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Remarkably, at least half of the interviewees stated they visited a psychologist for the first time in Berlin. This is not to say that they could not afford such services in Georgia because several LGBTQ+ organizations provide free psychological services too. Instead, as one of the respondents claimed, being alone in the face of stress pushed her towards using such a service.

I don't know; sometimes I had panic attacks, dreams. I'm struggling with something; I'm coping on my own... I go to a psychologist, we talk. By the way, I have never been [to a psychologist] before, and there is such an attitude here... stress, stress, stress because I am alone here. When you talk with someone, you neutralize your emotions a little. [Respondent 3, a lesbian woman]

The experiences of most respondents suggest that asylum seekers benefit from free, queer-sensitive psycho-social counseling services available at different queer NGOs in Berlin. Furthermore, these services are provided in different languages or with the help of relevant language interpreters. Consistent with other studies (Held, 2022), this study showed that LGBTQ+ organizations play an important role in support for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin. Alongside creating safe spaces and providing various services, which are essential for them, these organizations support them in different aspects of life, including issues related to the legal procedures of asylum. While this is the case in many, the quote from one of the respondents shows it well.

Actually, they [the migration office] didn't want to keep me here [in Berlin], and Schwulenberatung helped me. I had some problems in the room, they helped me and did many things for my well-being. [Respondent 1, a gay man]

Overall, respondents' experiences propose that LGBTQ+ NGOs provide essential services to queer asylum seekers to ease the burden of SOGI-related harassment and violence as well as oppressive asylum procedures. Moreover, the fact that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers can rely on these organizations supports their well-being.

Conversely, some participants reported that they rely on either themselves or their friends instead of seeking professional help. They did not discuss the reasons why they do not receive professional support.

I deal with [stressful situations] by myself; that is, I am a psychologist for myself. I think that everything will be fine. As I mentioned in the conversation, circumstances also help me; people help me in my daily life. [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

Personally, I don't isolate myself when I'm stressed and I'm feeling bad... There are particular people I'm friends with, very close, who support me, with whom I can talk about everything. [Respondent 8, a trans woman]

According to Held's (2022) report, although most LGBTQ+ asylum claimants recognize the significance of support from LGBTQ+ NGOs and groups, some have reported that these spaces can be exclusionary, too, due to what they refer to as "white queer structures." The respondents of my study did not report such events, which does not necessarily mean that it does not happen. Instead, perhaps I did not focus on that aspect enough during the interview. Perhaps they did not feel confident to criticize them due to their vulnerable position and a feeling of illegitimacy. In any case, there is a need for further investigation in this field to address any potential shortcomings to ensure barrier-free access to services.

6.2 Escape

More than half of the interviewees reported that the best strategy to deal with stress and avoid discrimination and ill-treatment is to hide, in this case, to escape from the shelter, either temporarily or permanently. They claimed that when they feel stressed, the best way to feel better is to keep themselves away from the shelter environment and go out with friends for drinks and fun. While this is the case for more, only two quotes are provided below.

I go out with close friends to a bar or somewhere to have fun. This is how [I deal with stress]. We drink [alcohol] and talk more and listen to music. [Respondent 5, a trans woman]

Here, too, there is the stress of waiting, the stress of everything. And those people will make you forget everything. In other words, you forget [problems] with those people,

and you are in a different environment. Then you return to it [shelter], these things [stress] wake up. [Respondent 1, a gay man]

Although this strategy seems effective from a short-term perspective, it can lead to numerous harmful habits, such as alcohol and drug consumption and related risky sexual behavior. As far as this issue was not the focus of this research, I will not discuss it further. The two quotes above show the ambivalence of the LGBTQ+ refugee shelter. On the one hand, it is a safe space to express their sexual orientation and gender identity in contrast with general refugee shelters. On the other hand, it can become a not-so-safe space due to the complex intersecting identities of queer asylum claimants and the lack of privacy.

Furthermore, Andrade et al. (2020) claimed that an effective asylum accommodation policy requires giving options to queer asylum seekers or providing them with accommodations customized to their needs. The current study also shows the importance of having a separate accommodation for Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. For example, some respondents need to escape from the shelter not temporarily but permanently to redress the stress. They argue that the stress and problems will remain until they live with so many people in the same environment.

Moving from here [will solve my problems]. Of course, living without negative people will sort out my situation. [Respondent 7, a questioning person]

Changing the environment [will improve my condition], first of all, personal space and then... It's a psychological moment when you have your corner, your nest arranged the way you want, and you are by yourself... Even to overcome that stress... [Respondent 2, a trans woman]

Remarkably, all the domains of the integration framework are intertwined, which makes it clear that an effective response to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers' needs require a holistic approach. Despite focusing on the social connections domain, the respondents kept mentioning the crucial issues related to housing, language, etc. For example, living in shared accommodation with other asylum seekers alongside high uncertainty related to their asylum application reinforces the feeling of isolation and non-belonging. As a result, queer asylum seekers find themselves in a powerless position to take control of their lives and plan their futures before moving into

private apartments. Although the overwhelming majority extensively discussed this issue, the following quote confirms the significance of moving into separate apartments.

Now, next month I am moving [to a separate apartment] from this location; after a year and six months, I am starting a new life for the second time. [Respondent 1, a gay man]

Although moving to a private apartment will improve the situation of many LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in many ways, it does not guarantee them the right to remain in Germany. They are still waiting for the outcome of their asylum application, which still poses significant stress due to uncertainty and fear of rejection. Therefore, this is just another step forward in this long journey rather than the final destination.

7 Conclusion

This chapter unites the conclusions, summary, and limitations of the study. First, the conclusion is drawn by answering my research questions and referring to the previous research. Then an overall summary is provided, followed by limitations alongside recommendations for future research. The aim of this thesis was to investigate social integration-related challenges queer asylum seekers face in the EU and explore the strategies for handling them. To achieve this goal, the case of the Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Berlin, Germany, was selected. The data was collected based on eight in-depth interviews with Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers at a queer refugee shelter in Berlin, Germany. The analysis was performed through a complex process of thematic analysis in conjunction with the application of intersectional lenses and social connections domain of the integration framework. In addition, previous research was effectively utilized to complement the data and allow a comprehensive analysis. My conclusions are as follows:

How do Georgian queer asylum seekers experience social integration in connection with state institutions?

Although, at first, most of the respondents describe feelings of relief and freedom to express their sexual orientation and gender identity in the host countries, during the asylum process, they encounter multiple types of intersectional discrimination and harassment based on their sexuality, gender, refugee status, ethnicity, and intersecting of those identities from the

administrative staff and security guards of the relevant state institutions, that is LAF in most cases. This creates barriers to service provision and hinders the integration process. The same issue was also seen in Chossière's (2021) study of queer refugees. Moreover, LAF, through the migration system, exposes LGBTQ+ asylum claimants to their ethnic-like communities, in this case, non-queer Georgians, which usually results in SOGI-related harassment. Study findings suggest that trans* identity alongside refugeeness seems to be the hardest to negotiate. Chossière (2021) also observed that trans* asylum seekers face compound challenges in the asylum process. On the contrary, the experiences of some of the respondents, mostly gay men, indicate that fitting into heteronormative standards grants queer asylum seekers less discriminatory encounters. Overall, the experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers with state institutions can be characterized as complex and contradictory.

How do Georgian queer asylum seekers experience social integration within the local society in Berlin?

Firstly, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers displayed mostly superficial relationships with the local society due to language barriers. These interactions with non-queer society are complex, usually occur in public or social spaces, and are ambivalent. On the one hand, most of them imply the feeling of acceptance and support in terms of SOGI, but mostly negative attitudes regarding their refugeeness. Moreover, their encounters indicate the practices of social exclusion and othering due to asylum status, which impedes their integration process. Paradoxically, data suggests that some of them may be subject to homo/transphobic incidents as well as support due to their refugeeness. All of these align with previous research findings (Alessi et al., 2018; Andrade et al., 2020). The interaction experiences with local LGBTQ+ people are also ambivalent. The respondents' narrative suggests that alongside positive attitudes and support, they can also be marginalized due to their asylum status. This, among other problems, creates barriers to finding a partner and starting a relationship. Consequently, their feeling of non-belonging is strengthened, and their integration is hindered. This was also seen in at least two studies (Chossière, 2021, Held, 2022). That is why hiding their refugeeness in the local queer community seems to be a common strategy, referring to yet another closet for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

How do Georgian queer asylum seekers experience social integration within the Georgian migrant community in Berlin?

The findings of this study indicate that most of the Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers experience homo/transphobia from fellow Georgians in Berlin. These incidents usually occur in general refugee shelters, LAF building, and public spaces. Such negative relationship dynamics impede their integration process. The respondents' experiences suggest that anyone within LGBTQ+ may face homo/transphobia. However, trans* asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable in the face of such incidents, mostly because of the visible manifestation of their identity. Accordingly, those who hide their identity can avoid discrimination or ill-treatment. Data shows that the outcome of the experiences of Georgian queer asylum seekers is determined by various factors instead of sole geographical location. Overall, the interaction of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers with fellow Georgians is dominated by negative experiences. The unfavorable relationships between LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and like-ethnic communities are also found in previous studies (Alessi et al., 2018; Chossière, 2021).

How do Georgian queer asylum seekers deal with the social integration-related challenges in the asylum-seeking process in Berlin?

The study's findings revealed that due to previous experiences of persecution and violence in their country of origin, alongside the complex inequalities they face across different stages of the harsh asylum process, the mental health of most LGBTQ+ people are deteriorating. However, LGBTQ+ organizations seem to play an important role in supporting queer asylum seekers by providing psychological services. In addition, these organizations offer free legal and other relevant services in different languages. Despite some shortcomings, the experiences of most respondents suggest that they rely on these organizations to deal with some of the challenges that emerge during the asylum process. This was also seen in previous studies by Held (2022), Andrade et al. (2020), and Chossière (2021). Simultaneously, many also choose peer support and self-reflection to deal with stress and critical moments during their asylum. In addition, some of them tend to go out for alcoholic drinks in response to stressful moments, which they describe as helpful in the short term. Although, I argue that it can impose important issues related to alcohol or any other addiction and related risky behaviors in the long term. Such strategies were not found in the previous studies discussed in this thesis. Instead, one of

them (Held, 2022) discussed the collective efforts of refugees as a tool to overcome obstacles, which itself was not seen in my study.

Reflecting on the conclusions, I realize that the integration experiences of Georgian queer asylum seekers are similar to those queer asylum seekers coming from different countries to various European countries because my research findings align with previous studies, which were discussed in this thesis. In addition, it became clear to me that integration is a complex process, and to fully understand it, an examination of all domains of the integration framework and the inclusion of as many variables as possible in the intersectional analysis are necessary. Hence, I recommend that future research with Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum seekers scrutinize all aspects of the integration framework and apply other manifestations of identities manifested within the target group.

7.1 Summary

Many LGBTQ+ individuals flee from homo/transphobic persecution and violence from Georgia and seek asylum in Berlin, Germany. While numerous international organizations rank many European countries as safe for the LGBTQ+ community, many queer asylum seekers believe that once they reach these countries, they will leave their SOGI-related oppression in their country of origin and start a happy life with freedom and liberation. However, the reality is more complex and differs from imagination due to repressive asylum procedures and anti-refugee sentiments in society. The asylum-seeking experiences of LGBTQ+ people are ambivalent due to their multilayer intersecting identities.

While queer asylum seekers must constantly negotiate their multiple identities depending on different situations, LGBTQ+ refugee shelter remains the only safe place to be fully themselves in terms of SOGI. However, they display ambiguous feelings toward that space too. On the one hand, most feel safe to claim and express their sexual orientation and gender identity. However, on the other hand, some are subjected to discrimination, for example, on the grounds of religion. In addition, while most of them acknowledge the importance of LGBTQ+ refugee shelter and togetherness/solidarity between each other, due to controlling one another and peer pressure alongside lack of privacy, once safe space becomes not-so-safe space, from where most of them need to move out. Although for newcomers, this shelter seems to be important

and helpful to begin their asylum journey. Therefore, based on this study, private accommodation tailored to their needs is required in order to address these issues.

Speaking of discrimination and harassment during the asylum process, one can argue that queer asylum seekers experience complex, reshaped forms of oppression rather than liberation after leaving their country of origin and seeking asylum in “gay-friendly” Europe. Instead, their experiences with local society, like-ethnic communities, and state institutions are ambivalent and ambiguous across all domains of social integration. The ambivalence indicates relationality (Held, 2022), which is the fundamental principle of intersectional analysis, according to which every individual or thing is connected to one another instead of being in isolation. Furthermore, relational thinking opposes and transcends binary thinking (Collins and Bilge, 2016, cited in Held, 2022). Hence, describing the asylum experiences of Georgian LGBTQ+ in Berlin as ambivalent and ambiguous showcases the complexity and diversity of those experiences instead of labeling them either as liberated or as victimized.

7.2 Limitations

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. This study focused on the social connections domain of the integration framework, while other domains are still undiscovered. Notwithstanding that examination of the social connections domain provided generous data and interesting analysis, it also demonstrated the importance of other domains and their intertwinement, for instance, in terms of language and how this affects their relationship with the local community. Therefore, the comprehensive analysis of the LGBTQ+ asylum claimants’ integration requires that the next research cover all the domains of the integration framework.

Secondly, the majority of the respondents were trans* women. Despite the importance of amplifying their voices, this study lacks equal representation of different categories within the LGBTQ+ group. For instance, bisexual individuals and trans men are absent in this study. Their stories are equally interesting to capture and analyze. Moreover, the intersectional analysis showed how the experiences vary within the LGBTQ+ spectrum based on their unique identities and encounters. Hence, the next research on LGBTQ+ asylum seekers should call attention to this aspect and include different sub-groups in the study to allow a more in-depth understanding of their situation.

Moreover, this study emphasized sexual orientation, gender identity, and refugeeness as its main variables for the intersectional analysis. In addition, class, religion, and ethnicity were touched. While it was demonstrated that the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are determined by various identities they carry, I argue that the subsequent studies with queer asylum seekers account for as many manifestations of identities as possible to allow far-reaching analysis.

Despite all, this study captures the complexity and diversity of Georgian LGBTQ+ asylum claimants' experiences based on their multiple intersecting identities. It serves as an entry point for future research on this particular social group. In addition, this study contributes to the wider field of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers' social integration in the European Union.

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9 Appendixes

9.1 Appendix 1: An informed consent form [EN/GE]

Informed consent

The following is a presentation of how we will use the data collected in the interview.

The research project is a part of our education in the International Master's program in Social Work and Human Rights at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. In order to assure that our project meets the ethical requirements for good research, we promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether they will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for us to document what is said during the interview and also helps us in the continuing work with the project. In our analysis, some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project, the data will be destroyed. The data we collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions or terminate the interview without giving an explanation. It does not have any connection with my role as a voluntary interpreter at the queer refugee shelter. Hence, participation in this project is based on your pure voluntary will.

You are welcome to contact us or our supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Student name & e-mail

Tamazi Sozashvili

tamazsozashvili@gmail.com
tazo@queer.ge

Supervisor name & e-mail:

Anna Ryan Bengtsson

Senior lecturer, Department of Social work,
Gothenburg University.

anna.ryan.bengtsson@socwork.gu.se

ინფორმირებული თანხმობა

ქვემოთ მოცემულია პრეზენტაცია იმის შესახებ, თუ როგორ გამოვიყენებ ინტერვიუში შეგროვებულ მონაცემებს.

კვლევითი პროექტი ჩვენი განათლების ნაწილია საერთაშორისო სამაგისტრო პროგრამაში სოციალური მუშაობისა და ადამიანის უფლებების მიმართულებით, შვედეთი, გოტენბურგის უნივერსიტეტში. იმაში დასარწმუნებლად, რომ ჩემი პროექტი აკმაყოფილებს კარგი კვლევის ეთიკურ მოთხოვნებს, გპირდებით, რომ დავიცავ შემდეგ პრინციპებს:

- პროექტში გამოკითხულებს მიეცემათ ინფორმაცია პროექტის მიზნის შესახებ.
- რესპონდენტებს აქვთ უფლება გადაწყვიტონ მიიღებენ თუ არა მონაწილეობას პროექტში, ინტერვიუს დასრულების შემდეგაც კი.
- შეგროვებული მონაცემები დამუშავდება კონფიდენციალურად და შეინახება ისე, რომ არაავტორიზებული პირის ნახვა ან წვდომა არ იყოს შესაძლებელი.

ინტერვიუ ჩაიწერება, რადგან ეს გამიადვილებს ინტერვიუს დროს ნათქვამის დოკუმენტირებას და ასევე დამეხმარება პროექტზე შემდგომი მუშაობის გაგრძელებაში. ჩემს ანალიზში, ზოგიერთი მონაცემი შეიძლება შეიცვალოს რათა არც ერთი ინტერვიუერი არ იყოს იდენტიფიცირებადი. პროექტის დასრულების შემდეგ მონაცემები განადგურდება. ჩემს მიერ შეგროვებული მონაცემები გამოყენებული იქნება მხოლოდ ამ პროექტში.

თქვენ გაქვთ უფლება უარი თქვათ ნებისმიერ კითხვაზე პასუხის გაცემაზე ან შეწყვიტოთ ინტერვიუში მონაწილეობა ახსნა-განმარტების გარეშე. მას არავითარი კავშირი არ აქვს ჩემს, როგორც ნებაყოფლობითი თარჯიმნის როლთან ქვიარ ლტოლვილთა თავშესაფარში. ამრიგად, ამ პროექტში მონაწილეობა ეფუძნება მხოლოდ და მხოლოდ თქვენს ნებაყოფლობით სურვილს.

თუ თქვენ გაქვთ რაიმე შეკითხვები (ქვემოთ მოცემული ელ. ფოსტის მისამართები) შეგიძლიათ დამიკავშირდეთ მე ან ჩემს სუპერვაიზორს.

სტუდენტის სახელი, გვარი:
თამაზი სოზაშვილი

tamazsozashvili@gmail.com
tazo@queer.ge

სუპერვაიზერის სახელი, გვარი:
ანა რაიან ბენგტსონი

უფროსი ლექტორი, სოციალური
მუშაობის დეპარტამენტი,
გოტენბურგის უნივერსიტეტი

anna.ryan.bengtsson@socwork.gu.se

9.2 Appendix 2: An interview guide [EN/GE]

Interview Guide:

Introductory Questions:

- What is your age?
- Which city/region of Georgia are you from?
- Were you employed in Georgia? In which sector?
- What was your highest education attained?
- What is your sexual orientation/gender identity?
- When did you arrive in Berlin, Germany?
- When did you apply for asylum?
- What is the status of your application now?

Social bridges

- Please discuss your experience of the relationship with local society in Berlin. What is your experience with the non-queer local community? What is your experience with the queer local community?
- Have you ever received any support from them? Have you experienced discrimination from the local society here in Berlin? Can you please remember such occasions? (country of origin, religion, or any other attributes)
- Is there a place, person, or organization that has been more important?

Social bonds

- What is your experience with the non-queer Georgian community here in Berlin?
- Have you ever received any support from them? Have you experienced any discrimination from them? Can you please remember such occasions?
- How is your relationship with other Georgian queer asylum seekers in Berlin? Have you received any support from them? Have you ever experienced any form of discrimination from them? Can you please remember such occasions?

Social links

- How do you characterize your experience of interaction with state institutions? For example: when seeking social or any kind of assistance?

- Have you received any support from them? Have you experienced any discrimination or inappropriate treatment? When and why? What was the reason?

Follow-up questions:

- How do you deal with all these challenges?
- Are there things that you think could improve your situation? Either in the local community, the Georgian (queer/non-queer) community, or by state institutions?
- **Finally**, is there anything else you want to discuss related to your social integration in Berlin, Germany?

ინტერვიუს გზამკვლევი

შესავალი კითხვები:

1. რამდენი წლის ხართ?
2. საქართველოს რომელი ქალაქიდან/რეგიონიდან ხართ?
3. დასაქმებული იყავით საქართველოში? თუ კი, რომელ სექტორში?
4. რომელია განათლების უმაღლესი დონე, რომელსაც მიაღწიეთ?
5. რა არის თქვენი სექსუალური ორიენტაცია/გენდერული იდენტობა?
6. როდის ჩამოხვედით ბერლინში, გერმანიაში?
7. როდის გააკეთეთ განაცხადი თავშესაფრის მოთხოვნაზე?
8. რა ეტაპზეა თქვენი განაცხადი ახლა?

სოციალური ხიდები

- გთხოვთ, გავგიზიარეთ თქვენი გამოცდილება ბერლინის ადგილობრივ საზოგადოებასთან ურთიერთობის შესახებ. როგორია თქვენი არაქვიარ ადგილობრივ საზოგადოებასთან ურთიერთობის გამოცდილება? როგორია თქვენი ადგილობრივ ქვიარ საზოგადოებასთან ურთიერთობის გამოცდილება?

- მიგილიათ ოდესმე მათგან მხარდაჭერა? გამოვიცდით თუ არა დისკრიმინაცია ადგილობრივი საზოგადოების (ქვიარ/არაქვიარ) მხრიდან აქ, ბერლინში? შეგიძლიათ გაიხსენოთ ასეთი შემთხვევები? (ქვეყანა, ეთნიკური წარმომავლობა, რელიგია ან სხვა მახასიათებლები)
- არის ადგილი, პიროვნება ან ორგანიზაცია, რომელიც უფრო მნიშვნელოვანი იყო?

სოციალური კავშირები

- როგორი გამოცდილება გაქვთ ბერლინში არაქვიარ ქართულ საზოგადოებასთან ურთიერთობის?
- ოდესმე მიგილიათ მათგან მხარდაჭერა? გამოვიცდით რაიმე სახის დისკრიმინაცია მათგან? შეგიძლიათ გაიხსენოთ ასეთი შემთხვევები?
- როგორია თქვენი ურთიერთობა სხვა ქართველ თავშესაფრის მაძიებლებთან ბერლინში? მიგილიათ რაიმე მხარდაჭერა მათგან? ოდესმე გქონიათ რაიმე სახის დისკრიმინაცია მათგან? შეგიძლიათ გაიხსენოთ ასეთი შემთხვევები?

სოციალური ბმულები

- როგორ ახასიათებთ სახელმწიფო ინსტიტუტებთან ურთიერთობის გამოცდილებას? მაგალითად: როდესაც ეძებთ სოციალურ ან რაიმე სახის დახმარებას.
- მიგილიათ რაიმე მხარდაჭერა მათგან? გქონიათ რაიმე სახის დისკრიმინაციის ან არასათანადო მოპყრობის გამოცდილება? როდის და რატომ? რა იყო მიზეზი?

შემდგომი კითხვები:

- როგორ უმკლავდებით ყველა ამ გამოწვევას?
- არის თუ არა რამე, რაც, თქვენი აზრით, თქვენს მდგომარეობას გააუმჯობესებდა? ადგილობრივ თემში, ქართულ (ქვიარ/არაქვიარ) თემში, სახელმწიფო ინსტიტუტების მხრიდან.
- დაბოლოს, არის კიდევ რამე, რისი განხილვაც გასურთ თქვენს სოციალურ ინტეგრაციასთან დაკავშირებით ბერლინში, გერმანიაში?

9.3 Appendix 3: Map of the themes

The map of the themes and sub-themes structured as per thematic analysis.

