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Faculty of Engineering Technology Group T Leuven Campus

Bachelor of Engineering Technology

A Final Assignment for the Course of Intercultural Communication (Year 2018 - 2019)

**Finding Our Way Through Labyrint**

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# introduction

The instruction for this assignment was to step out of our comfort zone and engage in a new element of strangeness. A lot of other teams sought to encounter culturally diverse people based on where they were born, but we decided to do something different. Our team agreed to partake in an activity organized by the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community. One member of our team, Michiel, is closely related to the coordinator of a lesbian association in Leuven, called Labyrint. They offered us the opportunity to participate in one of their monthly activities.

A close up of a map

Description automatically generatedThe focus in this report is to link multiple occurrences during the encounter with possible causes like Identity, Otherization, and Representation. Firstly, we explain as to why we chose this community to conduct our research. Following this explanation, there will be a detailed description of the encounter itself. Thirdly, we analyzed, discussed, and linked the results to the different themes we have covered during the course. We will end the report with a brief conclusion on our findings.

# Interest

Our team noticed that the social approval of the LGBT community varies from nation to nation. In the figure below (Same-sex union legislation, 2019), one is able to infer that same-sex marriage is approved in America, Australia, and in most European and Latin-American countries. In Asia and Africa, however, same-sex marriage is not commonly recognized by the government, except Taiwan, which has legalized the same-sex civil union in May 2019 (IB, 2019). In the Middle East, it is equally strictly prohibited and same-sex couples can face the death penalty.

The regional difference in social approval can also be noticed without visual data. In Brussels or Leuven, for example, bars that mainly serve LGBT groups usually hang out the rainbow flag. This shows their confidence in demonstrating their differences towards others. Society seldom violates this freedom of expression. On the other hand, in mainland China, it is occasionally rumored that an LGBT gathering is compulsorily wound up by the police.

Our team is composed of three Flemish students and one Chinese student. Various societal backgrounds provided us with different perceptions of the LGBT community. The interest for the encounter came when we realized two members of the team (Ciaran and Michiel) have close friends who identify themselves as being part of the LGBT community. The other two members, Pieterjan and Tianyu, had never even met an LGBT member before.

The media provides a lot of knowledge and opinions, but it can also unconsciously form prejudices. We wanted to detect and possibly remove these prejudices about the LGBT community by arranging a face-to-face encounter. We also wanted to know if homosexuals would act or feel different in their secluded community as opposed to other communities. Therefore, we chose the following research question: ‘How do people who identify with the LGBT community act, feel and see themselves in our society and in their secluded community? How did our encounter with the LGBT community influence our perceptions about them?’

# Encounter

Around the middle of March, we received a proposal date to participate in an event with the lesbian organization. We were told that in two weeks, on April 2nd, we were invited to join them in a bar named “The Rocco” for an event aimed at homosexuals under the age of thirty. That night, one of the women present told us that *rocco* is an Italian noun meaning ‘rock’, but also ‘rest’. Apparently, this name was chosen because many people see this bar as a place they could always firmly hold on to. No matter how bad things got in their day-to-day life, “The Rocco” could always serve as a stronghold.

We decided to meet beforehand and walk to the bar together. This quickly turned into running as it started to pour outside, which probably made for a funny first impression to those already present in the bar. Outside the bar hung a sizeable flag, colored like a rainbow. The moment we opened the bar doors, the first thing we saw was already surprising. Whereas in a bar usually you have smaller, isolated groups sitting by themselves, here they all stood in a collective group, facing the door as to be welcoming. The place looked like any other bar, around four tables spread out, the bar straight across the entrance, a beamer pointed to the wall for the karaoke and some barstools at the beer tap. We proceeded to greet the man behind the bar, for he was the one who arranged the meeting. He told us we were lucky because tonight it was karaoke night. We felt a bit too nervous to meddle at first because not a lot of people were present yet.

We ordered a beer and sat down at a table. As the night progressed, more people entered. It seemed like they all knew each other. Most people joined the big group; only a small group of four men took seats at a separate table. At first, the atmosphere was very quiet and casual. Some of the more daring customers were already singing karaoke, but most of them were just getting comfortable like us. We came up with the idea to join them for karaoke as a way to break the ice. We stepped up to those around the microphones and asked if we could participate. Singing with them was not as scary as we imagined it would be. On the contrary, we enjoyed ourselves.

After the karaoke, it was easier talking to them. Instead of sitting at the table by ourselves we were now part of the big group, talking to them and listening to their stories. We spoke to as many as possible, to those who looked just like any other person, and to those who expressed themselves more extravagantly. The recurring theme in all those stories was that they all wanted a place where they do not need to prove themselves, separate themselves from stereotypes, or hide who they really are. For many of them, “The Rocco” was that place.

To us, it was clear that social stigma was less present here than in most other places. People were not as scared to show themselves without putting up a facade, just as they are, or as they see themselves. A nice example of this was a conversation that Michiel had while smoking a cigarette with a woman who was completely pierced, tattooed and had shaven pink hair. A woman like that would often receive weird looks in public, yet here she was greeted by the crowd as any other human being. When Michiel asked her about her appearance, she was not ashamed about how she looked whatsoever. In fact, she gladly told Michiel about her motivation to customize her ‘extreme’ looks; hearing about the stories that were inked into her skin, the exhilarating life-choices that were completely different from ours. Michiel realized that, despite all of this, they had a conversation like two people from the same social group would. We heard plenty of stories, but this one stuck out to us as it portrays the spirit of the bar perfectly.

Another interesting fact is that, while it is an LGBT bar, they do not deny anybody else entrance. They told us that straight people, while their visits are exceptional, are welcomed just as warmly as any member of the LGBT-community. Even the night we were there, a night specifically for homosexuals under thirty, they served an older gentleman who was not gay and must have been around seventy years old.

We stuck around for a couple more hours singing with them. Around 1 AM we decided that we had properly partaken in the experience and said goodbye to those still in the bar. Walking home, we talked about our experiences and shared the stories that some of us might have missed. All four of us left with the same feeling: the community they had and the bonds they created with each other was something we could learn from.

# Conceptual Framework Analysis

Concretely analyzing pure qualitative data is quite complicated, as we are not working with numbers or queries to which simple calculations can be applied. Instead, we are required to link our personal experiences and collected stories to the different concepts we have learned in the course. Luckily for us, we can apply all three themes (Identity, Otherization, and Representation) to our intercultural encounter due to the LGBT community being a widespread controversial topic within our contemporary society. We’ll attempt to do this in such a way as to make the reader feel as he/she was present with us, but without influencing his/her personal conceptions.

## Identity

According to A. Holliday, M. Hyde, and J. Kullman (2004), Identity can be defined as “the way in which we all bring with us our own discourses and feelings of culture and negotiate these in communication,” meaning that individuals construct a certain image of themselves through the way they act towards and communicate with other people. To persons who are part of the LGBT community the notion of Identity seems very important, as they are confronted daily with people who narrow them down to the one thing that stands out to society: their sexuality. We noticed, however, that this stigmatization falls apart within their community; all members are on an equal playing field and can fully express themselves without the fear of being labeled (more about this in the upcoming paragraphs about Otherization). This results in the emergence of the multi-facetedness and thick description. Through observation and engagement, we were able to break through the above-mentioned sexual censure and uncover the complexity of the different individuals present during the karaoke night, much as Parisa’s European colleagues did in Unit A1.1 ‘People like Me.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

We can further extend the analysis of Identity by stating that knowledge of the LGBT community is not immediately of great essence when talking to people who associate themselves with this community. We did not require information about their presumed ‘culture’ in order to effectively communicate with them. If we were to be made fully aware of their ‘culture,’ we would have tended to define these people before understanding them. We need(ed) to be aware that these individuals’ cultures are just as complex and varied as our own. To be honest, if we were not aware of their sexual orientation, we would not have been able to derive it strictly from the way they acted and talked.

One of the things that struck us the most is the fact that, unlike Zhang and Ming in Unit A1.2 ‘Artefacts of Culture,’ the people we met in the bar were not ones to close ranks despite all the denouncements by the heterosexual community. What we experienced was completely the opposite; the moment we entered that bar, they were welcoming and heartwarming. We believe that this occurrence ties in with how the emphasis on sexuality completely dissolves within the LGBT community. To them, we were just another bunch of individuals from different backgrounds and interests. As a result, they also did not feel threatened by us and thus did not feel the need to play the identity card or mark their territory like the two girls in Unit A1.3 ‘Identity Card.’

## Otherization

As mentioned before, Otherization is a reoccurring theme when it comes to conversations about the LGBT community. Otherization “is the way in which we over-generalize, stereotype and reduce the people we communicate with to something different or less than they are (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004)”. The biggest threat is that we tend to reduce LGBTs to be less than what they are: their ‘atypical’ sexual orientation. As can be seen in Figure 4 ‘Constituents of Otherization’ in Unit A2.1 ‘Communication Is About Not Presuming,’ there are several elements which contribute to the act of otherizing. The combination of stereotyping, prejudicing, culturism, and essentialism shapes a dangerous trap that tricks a lot of people into observing certain attributes and characteristics of LGBTs and applying those solely to the idea behind the LGBT community. Consequently, some of us had the conception that lesbian women typically would be manly, sporting short hair and covered with tattoos. When we arrived, however, we realized our mistake and noticed how (culturally) diverse our hosts were; just like other people, they had their own preferences and traits, despite sharing a common factor.

Another element that surprised us was that there was not really a middle culture of dealing present, as explained in Unit A2.2 ‘Cultural Dealing.’ We believe that this could again be linked back to the fact that the sexual stigmatization falls apart within the LGBT community. This is not as to say that there was no culture of dealing at all during our interaction, but more so that the interaction was mostly impacted by the situation we found ourselves in. For example, were we to speak to a single, random stranger who identified him-/herself to be part of the LGBT community on the street, both this person and we would be carrying much more cultural baggage as this person would be in an unfamiliar environment in which the LGBT controversy would be sensible.

One of the most important aspects we had to pay attention to during our intercultural encounter was as not to be patronizing or condescending (see Unit A2.3 ‘Power and Discourse’). It was imperative for us that we looked past the biggest barrier of their sexual orientation, and deal with them as we would treat any other stranger. It was obvious to us that as long as we did not make a big deal out of it, they would not either. This does not mean we were not allowed to ask them about it, it just means that we had to make it clear to them that we were not simply there to talk about their ‘atypical’ sexual orientation while showing misplaced superiority.

## Representation

The biggest culprit of certain views on the LGBT community is Representation. “Representation looks at the way in which culture is communicated in society, through the media, professional discourses and everyday language. It focuses on how we need critically to recognize and address the ways in which these representations influence our own perceptions if we are to communicate effectively (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004).” When analyzing a certain image fed to you by the media or social interactions, you basically must critically ask yourself what is and what is not (likely to be) true. This is no different when talking about the LGBT community. In this way, it was necessary for us to switch to a filter through which we could see through the popular representations and interact with our hosts just as any other human being.

During the past few years, the media has mostly portrayed the LGBT community as a somewhat strange fact. Only recently society has started opening to the idea of the existence of different sexual orientations besides heterosexuality. Unfortunately, due to this shift having taken so long, a lot of people are still walking around with a rather negative opinion of the LGBT community. As mentioned in Unit A3.1 ‘Cultural Refugee,’ only by seeing through these fictions when encountering culturally strange people are we able to consider alternative representations. One of the best ways to achieve this is to set aside any prejudices, be openminded and experience firsthand an encounter with an LGBT. Thanks to some of us having positively interacted with an LGBT before the intercultural encounter, we expected that the people we were going to meet would be quite open towards us, but not to the extent where their sexual orientation would be disregarded. It shows that despite the (mis)Representation by the media and other persons, if we are able to look past these constructed images and put on the right filter, we can be blown away by the reality of things.

# Conclusion

This report described the encounter between our team and the guests who identify themselves as being part of the LGBT community in a bar named “The Rocco.” We described our observations on, communications with, and reflections from these guests.

Whether or not we all had encounters with this so-labeled ‘sexual minority’ beforehand, every single one of us enjoyed the experience at “The Rocco.” The guests in “The Rocco” drank, chatted, smoked, and sang just like guests would in any other bar. The encounter made us realize that “The Rocco” or Labyrint is just another small social group in which people gather together with a common interest and identity recognition. The status of the word ‘being homosexual’ can be considered to be equal to ‘being a music lover’ or ‘like swimming,’ which allows the (majority of) guests of “The Rocco” and members of Labyrint to find friends with the same interests and share their life stories. It has never been a reason for them to isolate themselves from the public and shall never be a reason for us to otherize them and treat them differently.

# References

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1. All Units within the paper refer to the units from the book of Intercultural Communication by Adrian Holiday, Martin Hyde, and John Kullman. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)