

Capstone Project

**Champions of Marginality: Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ rights activists' identity and experience  
as contentious contributors to the welfare of society**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the experience of Kazakh LGBTQ+ activists with a focus on their activist and intersectional identities, as well as their navigation of their work within a hegemonic state confronting non-cis-heteronormative people and expressions using the theories of intersectionality by Patricia Hill Collins and cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. The study has a qualitative design, including seven personal interviews with adult self-identified LGBTQ+ activists, and uses inductive thematic analysis for data analysis. According to the results, Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists construct their identity based on a totality of intersectional social markers, the central basis of which is their non-cisheterosexuality, and internalize it as a special perspective of more privileged representatives of their group whose duty is to help less lucky ones. They manifest this identity for the most part through resistance to symbolic hegemonic norms, focusing on helping LGBTQ+ people on the ground and changing the narrative about them, either without interacting or experiencing negative interactions with agents of hegemony – the systemic structures of Kazakhstan and its public majority. The study recommends a replication of this study with some revisions for greater representativeness, as well as an additional quantitative project on the same topic and in-depth studies on some of the trends revealed here.

**Keywords:** Kazakhstan; activism; LGBTQ+; intersectionality; hegemony; identity.

**Introduction**

This study examines the ways in which LGBTQ+ activists in Kazakhstan speak about their experiences of coping with social issues of homophobia and transphobia, as well as their self-identification as activists through the lens of Patricia Collins Hill's intersectionality theory. The project also uses the theory of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci, through which the activities of LGBTQ+ activists, in particular, their motivations to embark on an activist path, the strategies they apply in their work, and their interactions with the systemic structures and the public majority have been analyzed within the context of a hostile state. The main research question is as follows: how do Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists construct, present and manifest their activist identity in their activist work as members of a marginalized group opposing the state-supported cultural norms on gender and sexuality?

The first part of research question concerns the personal experience of activists who occupy a precarious and even volatile position in modern Kazakhstan because of the social groups they cover and the issues they raise. At a basic level, this study has tried to find out what, according to the activists themselves, it is like to be in their place, and do so by applying the theory of intersectionality. The study has attempted to understand whether they see being an activist as a separate part of their identity, or as the consequence of markers of gender and sexual identity. In addition, the concept of 'activist' has been considered as a self-identification in process, and its significance as a specific self-positioning factor for activists. Finally, the project has also explored if and how the activists see any intersections between their perceived issues and solutions for the cisheteronormative system of oppression and those connected to other markers of social identity.

The second component of the research question exploring the practical manifestations of an activist identity and a marginalized (LGBTQ+) identity has been handled through the

framework of cultural hegemony. The study has intended to discover how activists talk about their experiences as people who, on a frequent or even daily basis, challenge modern Kazakhstan's dominant ideas about gender and sexual norms, and what methods they use to draw attention to their problems and interact with structures of power and authority. Since LGBTQ+ activists must navigate their activities in terms of confrontation, subversion, or dialogue with an imposed cultural system that does not always accept them, it is important to consider how they describe this very system and their place in relation to it.

### **Contextualizing research on LGBTQ+ activism**

LGBTQ+ activism refers to a number of activities and has been analyzed by scientists in recent years as a social movement with the potential for a collective identity, the activists' focus being the improvement of the situation of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people in the state and society. The special feature of this capstone project, however, is that the activist identity will be considered explicitly – not as another facet of the life of some LGBTQ + people, but as a conscious self-imposed label – and the process of constructing this identity will put intersectionality at the forefront of its theoretical examination. In addition, the motivations and strategies of LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan will be covered as a product of the interaction with cultural hegemony, which as a concept defined by Antonio Gramsci is rarely or never used in scholarship pertaining to LGBTQ+ people and their activist movement.

Generally speaking, there is an extreme lack of academic literature about LGBTQ+ activists in Kazakhstan: about their history of beginning activist work, realizing themselves as 'activists', and what it is like for them to fight against the system of oppression that rejects or erases the people of their community. The topic of LGBTQ+ people in the Central Asian context has only recently been covered by several scholars, however it primarily focuses on the lack of

equal rights and opportunities for non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people in the region and their reactions to the social stigma surrounding their existence (Buelow, 2012; Levitanus, 2022; Wieringa et al., 2011). Those academics who make efforts to make new observations and theories while also giving voice to non-cisheterosexual people usually bypass activists and their identity, instead discussing the position of the LGBTQ+ community of Kazakhstan in relation to its foreign counterparts and global politics, as well as ways of its self-organization. Researchers such as Mariya Levitanus (2020; 2022), who prioritize the subjectivity and agency of LGBTQ+ people, only slightly touch on the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ activists in their work, considering it a strong self-imposed label for some of the respondents; however, they draw attention to the breadth and permeability of LGBTQ+ activism. According to the findings of their research, “queer” activism does not recognize the clear boundaries between formal (public) and marginal (intimate), including in its manifestations both the organization of events at the community level and small queer wedding ceremonies; hence, this activism builds on the ambiguity of queer identity as the basis of its practice (Levitanus, 2022). Although there is no investigation of the formation of an activist's identity under the lens of intersectionality as such, the findings nonetheless suggest that various markers of identity are worth paying attention to because of their potential significance. Other topical sources offer additional discoveries that point at the significance of activist self-identification and intersectionality, including the impact of post-Soviet identity on activists' self-labeling themselves with terms from Russian and English instead of Kazakh, and the prevalence of ethnic Russians in activist leadership positions (Buelow, 2012; Wieringa et al., 2011).

Moreover, studies of activists in other geographic and sociopolitical contexts consistently highlight the activist identity and how it is constructed under the influence of other social

markers, to correlate with different activism strategies for the benefit of the respective cause. Using the example of political and environmentalist movements, as well as specific LGBTQ+ activist groups and branches within larger communities, the findings of these studies confirm the complexity of the term ‘activist’ and its multilayered intersectional nature. Their authors discuss such things as the formation of a common political identity and its effect on activism strategies (Lyytikäinen, 2013), the presence of a visible common enemy as a breeding ground for strengthening of activist identity (Tiidenberg & Allaste, 2018), and the theme of inter-group alliance and intersectional mobilization as factors intensifying and improving activist practices (Terriquez, 2015). Each of these works proves that it is both possible and necessary to write about activist identity and its manifestations, and that the setting of a hegemonic limiting state like Kazakhstan is more relevant than ever because it can provide new insights into the activists’ organizational strategies.

### **Activism, intersectionality, and cultural hegemony**

The term *activist* borrows its definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary – “a person who uses or supports strong actions (such as public protests, but not limited to them) in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue” – referring to LGBTQ+ activists and taking into account their self-identification as such. It is also used as a potential separate identity marker or the status of a more socio-politically active member of any defined group. Emphasis is placed on the process of constructing an activist identity, in particular the biographical integration of an identity—the unification and superimposition of group perceptions of common belonging on unique personal experiences and experiences (Ruiz-Junco, 2011). Another key theoretical term in the study is *intersectionality*, as described by Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought* (1991). Recently, intersectionality has been emphasized as a critical theory that has the ability to

go beyond disciplinary boundaries and address multiple topics (McCall, 2005). According to Collins, “Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation” (1991, p. 18). The intersectionality paradigm allows one to consider the experience of LGBTQ+ activists in Kazakhstan in the framework of a complex organization of oppressions – the so-called matrix of domination – imposed on people and thereby forming their multi-layered identity (Collins, 1991). The markers invoking these oppressions, in addition to sexuality and gender identity that drive specifically LGBTQ+ activism, include social class, geographic location, ethnicity, nationality, and even spoken language (Collins, 1991). Furthermore, relating to LGBTQ+ activism, the system of heterosexism provides two additional dimensions for analysis: symbolic, with the assignment of certain gender and sexual meanings to non-cisheterosexual people, and structural, which supports the reproduction of oppression through social institutions (Collins, 1991). There is thus space to explore how such a complex system of oppressions affects activists, both in terms of their self-identification and the strategies of their resistance: and whether such resistance is realistic in general.

In order to understand the struggle strategies of the oppressed group, the study will also apply the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, in particular the concept of *hegemony*, the *organic intellectual* and power relations. Speaking about the class struggle from the point of view of Marxism, Gramsci supplemented Marx’s theory with the concept of hegemony – the supremacy of the ideology of the ruling class, which cultivates and ensures the preservation of the culture beneficial to said class as an inevitable and unquestionable norm (Gramsci & Hoare, 2018). For Gramsci, hegemony is based on the power concepts of *consensus* and *coercion*, which the state controlled by the ruling class uses alternately in varying proportions in order to maintain its

dominance (Francese, 2009). In relation to LGBTQ+ activists, hegemony is represented by the idea of cisheteronormativity that prevents non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people from uniting in their goal for liberation and society without oppression. Thus, as with Collins's dominance matrix, LGBTQ+ people's identity and activism are in constant tension with hegemony, being shaped and contextualized on the spectrum of dominant and counter-hegemonic (Molek-Kozakowska, 2021). Previous academic writings positioning activism as a counter-hegemonic movement have even questioned the very possibility of resistance to the system due to the activists' use of the same tools and ideological values (Molek-Kozakowska, 2021). This capstone project also aims at testing LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan for its limitations on the goal of restructuring the oppressive system and the tools to achieve it. It will also consider the intersectional identity of activists as a possible conflict point of disunity rather than multi-vector advantage, and discuss their possible inability to break out of capitalist social relations altogether (Francese, 2009). Finally, a previously unused theoretical approach in the topical literature will be adopted: Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists will be considered within the framework of Gramsci's term *organic intellectual*, as people who have emerged from an oppressed social class to organize and promote the struggle of the fellow marginalized (Francese, 2009).

## **Methodology**

Most studies on aspects of this capstone research – LGBTQ+ people, activists, or LGBTQ+ activists – are qualitative projects organized as ethnographies or interviews (Levitanus, 2022; Buelow, 2012; Lyytikäinen, 2013). This relative consistency of approach is explained by the nature of research audience: as a marginalized group, LGBTQ+ people are often difficult to reach in large numbers for a credible quantitative project, as well as any kind of activists, who

typically represent a small group of the most involved representatives of a particular community or cause. In addition, identity is a nuanced issue, involving subjective perception that is best left to the ambiguous multiplicity of meanings rather than being restricted by the operationalized definitions. For this reason, this capstone project also follows a qualitative format in the form of interviews to explore the self-perceptions of LGBTQ+ activists and survey their activity and strategies as expressions of their activist identity.

Seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who self-identified as Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists. Interview questions asked participants about their identity as activists and the story of their activist work, including their motivations and strategies. The interview questions were conditionally divided into three blocks: personal history, activist identity and strategies of activism – and represented a set of flexible introductions to the conversation, liable to change depending on the theme and the narrative the respondent chose to focus on (see Appendix A).

Since the study is of a qualitative design and targets a presumably small group within a social minority of LGBTQ+ people, the researcher has used purposive non-probability sampling for the interviewees, with an emphasis on the criteria for selecting the respondents rather than their number. The only selection criteria included identifying as a part of the LGBTQ+ community (non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual), self-identification as an LGBTQ+ activist with Kazakhstan as the primary place of activism, and being the age of legal majority (18 years old in research country). Other factors were not considered as sampling criteria, since the purpose of the study was to elucidate the perceived experience of people with different social markers in order to analyze the impact of intersectionality on a person's social position. Geographic location was also not taken into account; if the potential respondents considered



themselves Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists, the researcher provided the opportunity to conduct interviews online through Zoom and Google Meet platforms, with the possibility of live conversations for those respondents who were located in Astana and comfortable doing so. In addition, snowball sampling was the primary sampling method: those participants to whom the researcher had personal access were asked to tell their fellow activists about the project and invite them to participate, or share the researcher's contacts with prospective respondents and vice versa. Before the search for interviewees, the consent of the ethics committee was obtained.

The participants were recruited in several settings through the research announcement with a brief description of the project and the role of the prospective respondents, as well as the contacts of the researcher. The settings include channels for communication known to the researcher as attracting people from the LGBTQ+ community, including thematic Telegram and WhatsApp chats; as well as contacting some individuals who publicly position themselves as activists via Instagram and other social networks. Two of the respondents were recruited via snowball sampling – past respondents referred to them as possible participants. All participants were provided the description of the research project, as well as questions on their general interest ('Would you like to participate?'). If the respondents answered positively, they were sent the informed oral consent form and asked about the details of the interview (preferred language, online/offline mode, date, and location – if offline – of the interview), after which meetings or online calls were scheduled and held according to the mutual agreement of the researcher and the respondent.

The research population is a group of LGBTQ+ activists, seven people in total, 20 to 27 years old, of various gender identities and social classes. Six out of the seven identify as both ethnically Kazakh and Kazakhstani; one has Jewish ancestry. There have been three cisgender

gay male respondents, one cisgender queer respondent, one non-binary pansexual respondent, one cisgender bisexual respondent, and one gender fluid lesbian respondent. Respondents in the paper are referred by their preferred pronouns; if the pronouns differ, such as they/she, both are used interchangeably<sup>1</sup>. Four of them are located in Astana (with three of those having been interviewed offline in the face-to-face mode), and the other three are based in Almaty (with one temporarily living in Germany but residing in Almaty at the time of the interview).

Regarding reflexivity and the research's feasibility, despite the limited access to Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ individuals as a socially stigmatized group, access to the target community was relatively open to me as a researcher; this is because I have personal connections and an insider perspective as I also identify as a small-scale Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activist. This is certainly a factor of my positionality as a research, which has influenced the results of recruitment and the course of the interviews themselves; for instance, four of the seven respondents knew me personally and offered their services to recruit new participants. With those participants who were familiar to me, a strong sense of trust was also established, which led to more detailed answers. However, the remaining respondents, whom I had not known before, also showed no apparent discomfort; none of them refused to answer research questions. This may be due to several factors, including the general public nature of the activist work and the activists' habit of expressing their opinions about their identity and strategies. The fact that they were provided with descriptions of the project and their role in it in advance could also contribute to their perception of the research approach as respectful and sympathetic to their experience. Further reflecting on my position as a researcher with an insider perspective, I can

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<sup>1</sup> List of the respondents and their preferred pronouns: Respondent 1 – they/she; Respondent 2 – he/him; Respondent 3 – she/her; Respondent 4 – he/him; Respondent 5 – he/him; Respondent 6 – he/she/they; Respondent 7 – he/him.

say that it helped me in recognizing the local culture of LGBTQ+ activists, in particular, the specific Anglicisms or native Kazakh words that they often mentioned when talking about themselves and their work; and in seeing the sociopolitical context in which they exist. Moreover, as a Kazakh LGBTQ+ activist myself, I did not have to make any extra effort to decipher some of the meanings that participants put into their responses, which gave me space to collect the maximum amount of data and at times intuitively navigate the conversation towards the themes of identity and its manifestation in activism important for research. In addition, I hope and believe that my personal position, as well as my research interest, has allowed me to contribute to new perspectives of looking at the LGBTQ+ community in Kazakhstan, and with lower tendency to apply or construct popular stereotypes about it.

Nevertheless, after finishing the data collection, I consider it important to mention the limitations that I encountered in my study. First, due to its qualitative design, it cannot be tested with certainty for credibility, and its results cannot be extrapolated to larger populations and theories. Such a study focused primarily on ideas of self-perception and experience, prioritizing the subjectivity of the respondents, also cannot provide adequate data on social identity trends among the entire group of Kazakh LGBTQ+ activists or information on any causality between the studied concepts. In addition, while for the purposes of theoretical data analysis under the lens of intersectionality, the study sought to diversify its participants as much as possible, said diversity factor and the sheer higher quantity of respondents had to be sidelined due to the issue of availability of respondents and the effects of snowball sampling. Although I, as a researcher, had personal access to some of the activists, and formally contacted others through the specified contacts on their public accounts, three of the original 15 recruits ignored the recruitment message. Four more agreed, but eventually could not take part due to inconsistencies in

schedules, busyness, and even legal detention for reasons related to the specifics of their activism. Finally, another Kazakh-speaking respondent dropped out for language reasons, as research questions approved by the ethics committee were provided only in English and Russian.

In total, less than half of the people with whom the initial correspondence was made were able to become participants in the study, which led to its own limitations. One of them is that no one among the respondents lives in regional provinces of Kazakhstan: they reside either in the largest cities of Astana and Almaty or abroad. The age group, which initially included potential respondents close to 50 years old, has also dropped to the highest boundary of 27 years. Thus, the respondents were all young, educated, Russian-speaking people from the urban environment, which undoubtedly significantly reduces the generalizability of the findings of the study, as well as its representativeness. Among the interviews conducted, there were also problems that could affect the interpretation of their content and subsequent implications, including issues with the Internet during online interviews, microphone lags, and rare instances when the interview was suspended for several minutes due to the respondent's outside affairs. It is also worth noting a specific problem that I have encountered while conducting an online interview in the Zoom application: since I have a free version that limits the time of a single conference to 40 minutes, many respondents had to reconnect once or twice after each such timestamp, which could affect on the coherence of their narrative. In addition, there is always room for variation in the interpretation of open-ended interview questions, which creates specific individual biases. Some of the respondents understood the same question in different ways, and it led them to different topics of discussion; here it is also worth considering the linguistic peculiarity, due to which the Russian wording of the original English questions could contribute to the gap in interpretation.

As for my own limitations as a researcher, this is the first sociological project of this volume that I have carried out individually; my lack of extensive experience at all stages of research, from the formulation of questions to the grouping of themes in the course of theoretical analysis, may well have affected the results. As a researcher with an insider perspective, I also recognize the possibility of my own biases towards my target audience: I tended to recruit activists I already knew, thus lowering representativeness levels, and I could also be biased towards certain findings and prioritize them. My respondents, in turn, could see me not only as a researcher, but also as an advocate for their rights and well-being, which influenced their responses to this form and contributed to the possible emergence of role conflict. Finally, the lack of substantial literature on the identity and its manifestations in LGBTQ+ activism made it difficult for me to navigate my own research and contextualize it within the sociological field.

For further analysis, I have collected audio-recordings and text transcripts from all seven interviews. Three of the interviews are in English, and four in Russian; the length of the recordings ranges from approximately 20 minutes to 100 minutes. To assess them, I have used the academically highlighted method of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is described as extracting stories or narratives from respondents' responses that provide a comprehensive answer to the research question (Riessman, 2007). In the process of narrative analysis, the subjectivity of the research audience is taken into account, meaning that their navigation of the complexities of the social world is not limited to strict frames, and they are given the opportunity to show agency in constructing and sharing their experience (Seale, 2007). While LGBTQ+ people, for example, are often studied with a focus on established beliefs about markers of their identity such as discrimination, the narrative method allows such stories to be expanded or even refuted in some cases (Seale, 2007). Moreover, the narrative method covers both broad social processes and

individual decisions of the respondents (Seale, 2007). Such an intersection of macro and micro perspectives is relevant for issues of identity, especially in the theoretical field of intersectionality and cultural hegemony, where the constant interaction of the system of oppression with the oppressed and the ruling class with the subaltern one takes place on many levels at once. Of the sub-variations of narrative analysis, this project adopted a thematic method that was considered flexible and allowed the key elements of the findings to be clearly distinguished and interpreted without either redundancy or lack of detail (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In this type of analysis, the interviews were categorized using open coding – the gradual creation and modification of new codes. After that, the main themes – patterns in the data that seemed interesting or important – were picked out inductively by looking at the content of the interviews and interpreted (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This allowed me to look at a wide data set without its preliminary sifting, and to notice patterns that were not taken into account in the original design of the research question. The themes that will be discussed further include: social networks as an entryway to the LGBTQ+ activist community in Kazakhstan; activism as a calling vs. occupation and perceptions of ‘being an activist’; merging of different social markers in LGBTQ+ activists' self-identification; methods and factors of conducting LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan; and Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists' interaction with the country's systemic structures and public majority.

### **Joining the fight: offline and offline networks of introduction to LGBTQ+ community in Kazakhstan**

When asked about how and when they learned about LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan and their history of joining it, the same broad narratives began to emerge in respondents' responses. In particular, almost every participant mentioned the existence of a certain community

or network, which served as an initial information field for theoretical and, later, practical acquaintance with LGBTQ+ activism, and involved them too. Thus, the topic of offline and online networks of introduction to the LGBTQ+ activist community in Kazakhstan was singled out, within which three main categories can be distinguished: formal offline networks, informal offline networks and online networks. It needs to be mentioned before listing them, however, that these are not clear-cut, and in fact constantly overlap temporally and priority-wise, thus positioning LGBTQ+ activism as a fluid and comprehensive movement.

Formal offline networks include cases where respondents attended some kind of activist training, or programs that inspired them to engage in activism too. Thus, Respondent 2 notes, “My first encounter with it [activism] was with the feminist organization \*\*\*, when they were organizing meetings in every city with the feminists and with the queer folks”. He adds, “That was the first time I really got in touch with activism. And I was like, okay, I think I want to do that too”. Respondent 5, while talking in his interview about the training on civil society and human rights from local activists \*\*\*, refers to the same feminist organization as Respondent 2 as his introducers to practical activism. He says, “They told more about how they and their [activist] journey started”, and “they gave us tasks and tools about how, in fact, protests were very important for the country, how showing one's discontent was also important.” The same feminist organization is also mentioned by Respondent 6, stating that their association with it aroused in her “greater interest in feminist activism, here already quite closely associated with LGBT, namely LBQT women”. Thus, participation in events offered by already established LGBTQ+ organizations contributed to finding a community, gaining experience and inspiration. It is kind of a journey of being mentored, of creating a sense of belonging to a social minority group and a collective ‘queer’, meaning non-cisheterosexual, identity. In addition, Respondents 2

and 6 both talk about how independent steps towards their own projects followed their introduction to the LGBTQ+ activist scene. Their quotations follow below.

*Respondent 2, founder of a local NGO to improve the situation of the Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ community:*

“I started like applying for different programs and like for trainings to develop myself...”

“... first time when I had the opportunity to really think about my own project, like brainstorm it, conduct a social study about what I want to do.”

“... we gathered a team of activists and started implementing the project...”

*Respondent 6, host of a podcast about LGBTQ+ people and sex education, cyber activist:*

“... in June last year, I participated in a journalistic program... And there we had a training experience in podcasting.”

“... at this journalistic program, I decided to do my project about a podcast, about LGBTQ + sex education in Central Asia...”

“I applied with this idea already in September last year, also for one program... aimed at LGBT bloggers...”

“... there was a grant competition at the end for funding ... I won this grant, and it just helped me a lot in getting started...”

Thus, formal social networks serve as a kind of kick-starter for independent work of beginning LGBTQ+ activists, by opening their eyes to opportunities for both further professional development and funding.



Moving forward, perhaps the most common way to learn about and connect with LGBTQ+ activism is through informal offline networks – that is, one’s activist friends or allies who provide informational and emotional resources to support them. Almost every respondent mentions one or more people who, if not introducing them to LGBTQ+ activism per se, certainly supported their passion and served as a link in the chain of useful networking to forge more activist connections. Respondent 1, for example, recalls the following about her introduction to LGBTQ+ activism: “I started hanging out with a lot of people who are- who also identify as queer... I got involved in a lot of like LGBTQ+ parties.” Respondent 5 talks about two of his female friends with whom he legally applied to hold a protest, and one of whom eventually led a women's march in Astana; he also mentions a colleague who ended up involving him in outreach work. Respondent 6 says she has “... heard from fellow activists. And already at some events I already crossed paths with them, got to know them.” Respondent 7 says that in 2016-17 he asked his journalist friend about [an interview with a senior LGBTQ+ activist]; saying that “she confirmed that that man always gave public interviews. And I'm like, God, like, how is he not scared?”

Finally, the third main entry category of entry into LGBTQ+ activism is online networks, in other words, social media. Respondent 3, for example, found the outreach company he currently works for through the Russian social media app VKontakte:

“I think it was through VK or something. Uh, I found an organization. It was called [], and I learned that they spread contraceptives, and I was interested to acquiring some. And they were conducting a research...”

“So basically that's how I got to learn specifically these outreach workers, uh, whose job was to reach out to the LGBTQ+ community. And uh, basically, yes, that was how it all started.”

“... that manager who was conducting surveys with me and like I was kind of her client, she offered me a job.”

Respondent 5 also gathered information about the global LGBTQ+ rights movements and Pride marches<sup>2</sup> through VKontakte, mentioning that “there, like, in one of the public pages, where there are different stories, people could share their experiences, problems, moments.”

Respondent 4 found out about the NGO she is currently active in via Instagram:

“I found out about it [activism] a year ago. Quite by accident, actually. I got ads on Instagram... I was flipping through stories, and one popped up that one [LGBTQ+] organization is now recruiting new members for its team.”

Later, social media is also how she got to know more about the general situation with LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan:

“After I found out that there is such an organization, I applied and then I began to study this area in more detail, I realized that, in principle, we have a lot of different organizations that support the LGBT community...”

Respondents 6 and 7 – two self-proclaimed cyber activists – also learned about Kazakhstan's LGBTQ+ community via the Internet by reading posts, watching interviews with non-

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<sup>2</sup> A Pride parade is an outdoor event celebrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer social and self-acceptance, achievements, legal rights, and pride. The events sometimes also serve as demonstrations for legal rights such as same-sex marriage. (Wikipedia)

cisheterosexual public figures, and actively interacting with the movement's representatives online. Thus, online networks of introduction to LGBTQ+ activism can be called a fuse between its offline formal and informal counterparts, since they combine the advantages of both and stand out as spaces both for educating people about the LGBTQ+ community and activism, and for finding opportunities to work in activist sphere.

Having talked about the three salient categories of entry into LGBTQ+ activism of respondents, it is worth returning to Patricia Hill-Collins and her theory of intersectionality. Looking at the experiences of study participants, at least four of them explicitly mention the fact that their journey into LGBTQ+ movement began with a different type of activism: Respondents 2, 5, 6 and 7 list feminism as the first type of activism they joined, and Respondents 5 and 6 talk about civic oppositional activism as their introductory step. Some of the above-mentioned quotes confirming this notion of layering of activist spheres are as follows:

*Respondent 5, researcher and LGBTQ+ activist:*

“... my activity began after the parliamentary elections of '21. Well, this topic is not related to LGBT, but at that moment I really thought about how many problems occur in the country, discrimination from state bodies, political structures, ministries and all these of people.”

*Respondent 6:*

“I learned about activism and started joining it, being interested in it, in 2019, when the presidential elections were held in Kazakhstan. And so I met both civil political activists and activists. Well, also queer activists. But at first I was mostly involved in political activism.”

*Respondent 7, cyber-activist and the author of a Kazakh decolonial LGBTQ+ channel:*

“That is, initially, probably, I was interested in feminism, because feminism was more... That is, despite all the problems in our country, feminism is, of course, much more understandable [to people] than LGBT activism.”

The responses of the participants confirm the relevance of the theory of intersectionality regarding the activist identity of Kazakh LGBTQ+ activists: being under the influence of a whole system of oppressions – the so-called matrix of domination – they are not limited to only one set of their identities when they are engaging in their activist work. As Respondent 6 says, “... since politics is about feminism too, and the LGBT community too, it still all went side by side”. Thus, the non-cisheterosexual identity of respondents, at least when they enter activism, often acts as one of many social markers that facilitate their work, from a larger set of such constructs as gender and living as a politically oppressed citizen of an authoritarian state.

### **Light at the end of the tunnel: Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists’ motivations and self-positionality**

The theme of motivations that led the participants of this study to their current occupation in the field of LGBTQ+ activism showed certain consistency in the opinions of the respondents. The most common categories here were coded under *anger*, *personal struggle*, and *privilege*. Regarding the first category, three respondents spoke explicitly about feeling nervous or angry about the injustice in the treatment of LGBTQ+ people in the country. Respondent 4, for instance, commented on her choice to engage in activism by saying, “This [discrimination] has always disheartened me. I always got nervous”. Respondents 5 and 6, respectively, expressed their angry dissatisfaction with mistreatment on a more micro-level, referring to the feeling of

unsafety while being in public with a partner of their own gender. Respondent 5, talking about how he and his boyfriend were forced to break up by the parents of the latter, noted, “I would like to not see such cases of discrimination against other people in the future.” Both respondents also lamented about the perceived invisibility of LGBTQ+ people by the cisheterosexual majority in Kazakhstan, which makes their subsequent ostracization easier, since people believe there have never been LGBTQ+ Kazakhs – whether people or relationships. Respondent 6 mentioned how she aimed at increasing the representation of LGBTQ+ people, “Because when I was still not open and when I had just accepted myself, when I was 13-14 years old, I had no representation in Central Asia, in Kazakhstan, of people who spoke openly about their identity.” Furthermore, there was the category of personal negative experience, which sometimes was not expressed directly, besides the three respondents who explicitly mentioned it, but was nevertheless present as at least an implied factor in joining the activist movement. Respondent 2, for instance, cited his problems with personal finances and an unaccepting family, as well as that he believed in empathy for people with similar LGBTQ+ identities and experiences to be one of his motivations: “... it was my desire to help people just like me or people who are going through things that I have come through.” Finally, at least three respondents also included the idea of privilege in their explanation of coming to LGBTQ+ activism; for Respondent 1, it was the privilege of financial well-being and support from family, as for Respondent 6, who also shared with Respondent 7 the observation about the privilege of being open about one’s LGBTQ+ identity. Respondent 7 even went as far as claiming, “... based on my own privileges, it is probably a great privilege to engage in LGBT activism in our country, and in principle, in any type of activism. That is, most people, it seems to me, have no time for activism at all.” All these prominent codes point to one thing in common: a strong connection between personal

subjectivity and activism, between one's opinions formed by their identity and their work, which in turn can be interpreted within the framework of intersectionality theory. The argument here is that despite having a common enemy in homophobia and transphobia, a highly developed sense of collective identity, and the ability to empathize with others whose identities are similarly outside the normative cisheterosexual one, activists position themselves as benefactors of the community, looking at their target audience hierarchically, with a top-to-bottom approach. Virtually every one of the respondents mentioned some kind of resource that allowed them to become an activist, whether it was something intangible like family acceptance, a wealthy family, or even a negative experience that they felt had long ago been turned into skills of fighting social problems. In other words, activists chose to engage in their activism because they had the capacity to do so and use their voices for good: "if not me then who?" according to Respondent 7. Thus, it is possible to build a preliminary suggestion that this sample of Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists consists of people who are neither most oppressed nor rather privileged, but instead carry a more or less balanced combination of both experiences, which allows them to fight for the improvement of LGBTQ+ people's situation, while still being able to relate to at least some of their issues. These activists' opposition, as it were, has been supplemented with an advantage in another socioeconomic dimension, in order for them to be able to spend time and energy on solving social problems; otherwise, they would not have the strength or resources to participate in activism at all.

This suggestion also sheds interesting light on the aforementioned matrix of domination, pointing out that in the particular setting of this study, LGBTQ+ activists can only function if they are not completely crushed by a heavy overlap of oppressions and indeed can even possess the attributes of some of the oppressive groups to use subversively. Going further, one can assess

these activists through the lens of *organic intellectuals* from Gramsci's hegemony theory, meaning people from the marginalized masses at the very bottom of the hierarchical ladder, who are given intellectual tools for self-education and understanding of class-consciousness to cause an uprising against the oppressive class. In this case, based purely on research findings, it is impossible to say with certainty that LGBTQ+ activists can be considered organic intellectuals, since many of them, at the intersection of other identities, are somehow carriers of the ideology of the hegemonic class. For example, they could unconsciously support capitalism as members of a bourgeois family, like in the case of Respondent 1, who claimed to "... never have, like, any financial struggles whatsoever." Such position would somewhat distance them from their less fortunate audience; in fact, Respondent 1 herself said,

"I know that I'm privileged, and I know that I'm in the capacity to help other people... Because I can't even imagine how it feels like to be like, you know... to be abused by your family or your friends. And even so to like, financially depend on them, and like, be economically abused... financially abused, I mean."

On the other hand, some of the privileges discussed – such as family support or being open about one's LGBTQ+ identity – may come from traumatic experiences of forced outing and have their own repercussions. Considering this detail, one can instead build an argument slightly different from a rejection of LGBTQ+ activists as organic intellectuals, by combining both details from Hill-Collins's writings and Gramsci's diaries. Thus, the fact that Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists see themselves as the most fortunate out of the oppressed and fight for betterment of non-cisheterosexual people from that position can be seen as their rejection of the *symbolic* dimension of hegemony that manifests itself in negative implications of their non-cisheterosexual identities. At the same time, by being positioned as benefactors and exercising

the privileges they have, the activists at question still reproduce oppressive social institutions and even involuntarily adopt the cisheteronormative *structural* hegemonic dimension. The question of how effective such activist opposition to the hegemony of cisheteronormativity is in general, however, remains open and requires further consideration of aspects of the latter's behavior and opinions.

After asking why participants chose to become LGBTQ+ activists, the next theme that comes up is what it means to be an LGBTQ+ activist, as they understand it. The most prevalent response here was, "helping other people" (Respondent 1) or other variation of it, including "contributing to the community" (Respondent 1), "addressing the inequality between LGBTQ+ people and cisheterosexual people" (Respondent 2), as well as "freeing queer people" and "making their voices heard." Another sentiment expressed was the general openness and broadcasting of the situation of LGBTQ+ people, raising awareness about and solving their problems. Moreover, Respondent 3 was the only one who described being an LGBTQ+ activist in terms of stages and levels of risk, including so-called social activists "advocating for construction of some works... that were not targeted at the authorities", human rights advocates who "have higher risks of being politically imprisoned", and the activists "behind closed doors", who were the easiest to be exposed. In contrast, about half (3 out of 7 respondents) expressed the opinion that 'being an activist' does not have a clear definition whatsoever, as it is an abstract concept that anyone can interpret however they want, as long as they contribute to the improvement of the position of LGBTQ+ people (Respondent 3, 6). These findings are thus notable for their universality and even simplicity, reaching the level of Respondent 5's response, who described the activists as "bringing kindness into the world" and "lights at the end of the tunnel". If one replaced the target audience of LGBTQ+ people in the proposed definition with



any other oppressed group, one would get the same description. This observation is interesting in that it simultaneously supports the argument about considering LGBTQ+ activists as working within the framework of intersectionality, by presenting a possibility of various marginalized social markers, the goals of which are ultimately to oppose the matrix of dominance. At the same time, though, the definitions laid out by the respondents are refuting intersectionality's applicability, since they describe oppressed minorities as interchangeable in terms of their activism, devoid of complex layering of identities, and their experience absent of nuance. Further consideration of the theme of criteria and characteristics that define a person as an LGBTQ+ activist, however, dispels this fog of homogenization of oppression. Although there is a response from Respondent 3 about how 'being an LGBTQ+ activist' is subjective and involves different approaches ("We cannot know the objectivity here"), other participants in the study begin to impose additional, clarifying conditions on it. Thus, Respondent 2 emphasizes the importance of being truly connected to the LGBTQ+ community to which the activist makes a positive contribution, and Respondent 4 includes in her answer "a passion for the calling of activism and determination in order to consistently care for the well-being of the community and its problems". Most compelling, however, are Respondent 6's comments that an LGBTQ+ activist should identify as non-cisheterosexual themselves ("... a person, I think, should be queer, at least"), and Respondents 1, 2, and 7's opinion that the activist should be specifically *openly* LGBTQ+:

*Respondent 7:*

"Just being visible. Not hiding. We have a lot of such young people, who are open: they don't go to any kind of rallies, they don't write any kind of educational posts there. They

don't make any kind of content, they are just open. And I think it already is... It's a big moment of courage; a very big step for a person. And it is activism."

While it could be argued that other participants may have taken the first condition about the LGBTQ+ activist's basic non-cisheterosexual identity as a given, one cannot help but notice how these two comments greatly narrowed the focus within the definition of 'being an LGBTQ+ activist's', especially with the *openness* condition. The concept of open identity and coming out of the closet<sup>3</sup> is a specific phenomenon that is usually associated with the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, taking into account such details of the LGBTQ+ persons' experience, the respondents were able once again to defend the intersectionality of their activist approach, which contains both the common values and goals of the oppressed groups across various social markers, and yet does not lose sight of the specific features of the LGBTQ + people's experience. This also leads one to the next question of whether 'activist' itself is a distinct identity, an extreme combination of a person's identities, or an extension of the main identity it is based on; these ideas will be explored in the next section of the project.

### **Queerness as the crossroads of identity: merging of different social markers in LGBTQ+ activists' self-identification**

The issue of self-identification of LGBTQ+ activists in Kazakhstan is a significant research theme, accentuating activist identity among other markers of social identity used by respondents and asking which of these markers represent a key ideological base for their work. When asked how they identify themselves, all respondents used terms that denoted their belonging to a group of non-cisheterosexual people; six out of seven also explicitly mentioned

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<sup>3</sup> Coming out of the closet, often shortened to coming out, is a metaphor used to describe LGBT people's self-disclosure of their sexual orientation, romantic orientation or gender identity. (Wikipedia)

their gender identity by referring to pronouns they preferred to be referred by. Three respondents identified themselves as cisgender gay male respondents, one as a cisgender queer respondent, one as a non-binary pansexual respondent, one as a cisgender bisexual respondent, and one as a gender fluid lesbian.

To illustrate some of these LGBTQ+ identification cases:

*Respondent 1:*

“... I use pronouns they/she... I was always like, more masculine. So that's why like the first thing that pops off my mind immediately when asked about my gender identity or like identity overall, I think it's about like, that I'm not- non binary. I can't identify myself with the gender binary or heteronormativity. I also identify myself as pansexual.”

*Respondent 3:*

“I guess it [my identification] will be queer, like an umbrella term... the point is that there are some people of both genders that I was attracted to, and I don't want to disqualify that previous experience, although at the moment I might only be attracted to one gender. So basically queer kind of helps here. So you will not be kind of committed to something, only singular stuff. I can be open and fluid.”

*Respondent 5:*

“[I identify as] A cisgender male, he/him, queer: yes, queer comes more naturally... this defines me more, yes, because the word ‘queer’ is also, if I’m not mistaken, translated from English as ‘eccentric’, ‘strange’, but in a very good sense.”

All this, explicitly as well as tacitly, demonstrates the respondents' awareness of the various labels and ways of identifying on the spectrums of gender and sexuality, as well as the importance of these labels both in personal identification and within issues directly related to LGBTQ+ activism. In addition, all seven participants confirmed their self-identification as LGBTQ+ activists, which was the initial criterion for their involvement in the project, with Respondent 2 saying, “Yes. Yes. I identify myself as LGBTQ+ activist”, and Respondent 6 claiming,

“Yes, yes [I identify as an LGBTQ+ activist]. And I identify myself as Kazakh, as a Kazakh queer person. And I do not separate these identities – the national one and the gender-sexual one. It is as if all these factors, they live within me. Fem-activism, being Kazakhstani, Kazakh, lesbian and so on.”

However, four respondents, including Respondents 3, 4, 5 and 7, named themselves an LGBTQ+ activist with a certain reluctance, or expressed incomplete comfort with that identity marker. The reasons for their uncertainty were Respondent 3’s perceived inappropriateness of his specific type of activity – paid outreach work – for falling under the LGBTQ+ activism category, Respondent 4 and 5’s opinion on their own insufficient contribution to the LGBTQ+ community, and, in Respondent 7’s case, burnout and personal departure from this term due to a change in his main occupation. Below are the excerpts of what they had to say:

*Respondent 3:*

“But I didn't consider myself an activist because first of all, I'm paid for it. And like conventionally... activism is like a volunteer job. And if you're getting paid for it, it kind of disqualifies maybe weight of your work. But it was recently pointed out to me like...

about my services, so I felt like maybe somehow my work... influences the life of the community. So basically I can also be referred as an activist, although I don't really want people to acknowledge me that way also. But it was pointed out to me and I think it might be valid. Yes.”

*Respondent 4:*

“As for whether I can call myself an activist, it’s probably difficult for me to do this at the moment, because there is this categorical attitude towards myself, as if you are not doing enough to call yourself ‘a full-fledged activist’.”

*Respondent 5:*

“At the moment, for some reason, the first thought in my head is not the word LGBTQ+ activist, because I’ve been a little disappointed in myself, although no, not in myself, probably in these state bodies, which did not allow me to hold a Pride parade... I don't know, [I feel a] disappointment in myself, or something.”

*Respondent 7:*

“I don't seem to identify myself much as an activist. More like a content creator, critic, researcher... But I understand that outwardly, for society, I'm still an activist... At some point I was the opposite, like yes, I'm an activist... And now I’m somehow again at a stage in my life when maybe some kind of burnout or something like that is happening... If you go into activism once, then that's it, you think, there is no turning back. No, of course, there is, probably to some extent. But still, it seems to me that you can no longer look at the world differently, no matter how hard you try.”

In the final case, Respondent 7 gives an interesting description of the activist concept, saying that having entered society under the label of an LGBTQ+ activist, a person is practically unable to get rid of it. He explains that their image is already firmly associated with it externally, and, on top of that, the activist begins to observe things in society that remain invisible to ordinary people, internalizing a specific activist perspective. Seen like this, activist identity is both a process that can be disrupted or continued, and a kind of an ever-evolving component of one's essence, which helps develop a certain vision of the world and partially stays with the person forever, along with the possibility of moving away from it. Framed within Collins' theory of intersectionality, data analysis has therefore shown that an activist identity is an extension from a specific identity – in this case, the non-cisheterosexual one – that prompts entry into activism, but which then becomes a separate identity and interacts with the rest in a constant relationship of symbiosis and prioritization. Research participants have mentioned activist identity along with such markers as sexuality, nationality and nationality, as well as age and gender, discussing them as an integral part of themselves that influences their daily life. For instance, Respondent 6 said the following about nationality and culture, citing her activist focus on Central Asia as a special region:

“Often, when some materials about queerness appear in the media field, specifically about Kazakhstan, from the Kazakhs, if this content comes across the traditional society, they try to separate us from our nationality and say, ‘you are not Kazakh, you are a lesbian. Kazakhs cannot be like that.’ No, I am Kazakh. I can't do anything about it. I love my culture, my identity, my country... Therefore, our national identity and sexual orientation and gender identity play a huge role, especially when they go together... it's all real and compatible.”

At the same time, the respondents recognize that their multi-layered identity is formed and supplemented by various factors, both descriptive and internal – such as the obvious gender and sexual identity – and more external, including their geopolitical environment, family, friends, colleagues and work. Respondent 1 shared that it was at the university that they first saw “queer people in real life, and it was life changing”, and that their family’s non-gendered roles led them to think of it as something that could be both constructed and fluid. Respondent 3 said, “When some random people showed up at my door... at 12 a.m., asking if I was the person who distributes condoms, I realized that, okay, now I’m that outreach person and the words about me work for me now”. Additionally, Respondent 4 mentioned that her self-expression and identification as LGBTQ+ was affected by moving abroad from Kazakhstan: “It became easier to talk about myself when I moved to Germany”; by doing so, she both acknowledged that the country was perceived as a hostile state, and that identity was a mix of outside and inside influences constantly being at play with one another.

In addition, while reaffirming the intersectional nature of identity and the complex relationship between internalized oppressions, several respondents sometimes spoke of parts of their identity prevailing over others; typically, it was their identity as non-cisheterosexuals. Here, Respondent 2’s can best explain the point:

“My gay identity is way more prevalent in my life in general, because I’m even right now wearing a rainbow sweater. I think because of my struggles of being a gay person and LGBTQ+ activist, I have come to internalize these values... and immerse myself fully into the essence of being gay and activist.”

The quote by this respondent justifies his prioritization of his gay and activist identity due to the specific experiences – in this case, negative ones, that have resulted in a stronger internal

association with them, and greater presence in day-to-day life. Other respondents have also created, in their minds, a kind of hierarchy of identities, in which some were relegated to the background or deemed irrelevant for self-identification: for the most part, these were the social markers of ethnic and national identity. Respondent 1, for example, said the following: “I think I identify more with the first two – LGBTQ+ person and activist – rather than like being a Kazakhstani citizen. Because I don't feel like our country's accepting enough, I don't feel the support. And it's not only about the government, it's about the society itself.” Respondent 5 also noted, “In terms of ethnicity, I did not emphasize so clearly that I am Kazakh and Kazakhstani.” However, all participants have supported the argument that, at the end of the day, it is the aggregate of all different identities that constitutes their persona, thereby creating an image of a multitudinous overlap of social markers in interaction with each other in line with Collins’s intersectionality theory. Multiple respondents, just like in the abovementioned excerpt with Respondent 6, have even expressed their perception of themselves as a person with a combination of all their identities that cannot be in any way divided, in which each complemented the others and could not be fully felt in isolation from the others.

The final point to be made on this theme is that the absolute number of respondents expressed a notion that they do not base their activism purely on non-cisheterosexuality; even if it is the main driving force, other identities, from language to educational degree, enhance it and help define or narrow down the specific course of activism and its methods. Respondent 4 commented on this merge of identities as contributing factors for activist engagement:

“Then, having already enrolled in international relations, having understood what human rights are and so on, I began to be more or less interested in this [activism]. Probably, such a combination of my interests influences [my activism]... as you grow up, you have



more interests, you begin to bring it all together, and one point gathers where you can touch all areas of your life.”

Respondent 5, in a more specified fashion, said the following:

“Basically, in the *outreach work*, I was told that I was one of the only people who spoke Kazakh. While many people in outreach for some reason speak only pure Russian, and here in Kazakhstan not everyone speaks Russian... For some reason, I just now thought that in terms of the fact that I am a young man – this is probably a bit stereotypical, but young people think more about *protests* or *expressing their opinion*.”

Furthermore, the LGBTQ+ activist identity itself was seen by some of the participants as overlapping with other activist identities — usually in close collaboration — including the decolonial activist identity, as well as the identities of environmental and feminist activists. Respondent 1 mentioned the significance of being both an eco-activist and an LGBTQ+ one, and Respondents 6 and 7 talked extensively about how political and feminist activism have helped them come to and expand their LGBTQ+ activism, and find a community of like-minded people. This further shows the complex intricacy of identity interaction, and establishes Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists as people with a decidedly intersectional perspective on their work and societal issues in general.

### **Strategies of choice: methods of conducting LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan and factors influencing them**

The interviews have shown that surveyed LGBTQ+ activists are involved in a wide range of activities aimed at improving the situation of non-cisheterosexual people in Kazakhstan: capacity building projects within NGOs, informational campaigns, cyber-activism, outreach

work, online podcasts, street protests and rights advocacy, as well as informal interactions aimed at educating homophobic people they meet in everyday life. The analysis also holds that although, as mentioned in the previous section, their activism is based on the totality of their identities and social markers, it is specifically shaped by other factors too, many of which may have an indirect or minor bearing on identity. If we talk about cases of the former trend, Respondent 6 comments on the decision to start her own “queer” podcast from and for non-cisheterosexual people like this:

“And another reason is because I would like to amplify queer voices and provide people with a platform for them to share their experiences, so that the podcast is such a representation for queer people, so I try very hard to diversify the guests.”

On the other hand, Respondent 2 mentions that with his team at an NGO he found, they have conducted a study looking at the problems and needs of LGBTQ+ people in Central Asia. He talks about the reasons for choosing to do capacity-building projects:

“So I think because they [capacity-building projects] address the problem in different ways, in different approaches and on different levels. So official projects, they approach it like more on the larger scale, like the problems of domestic violence overall experienced by LGBTQ+ youth.”

Thus, in this case, research – social or otherwise – and the contextualization of the issues identified through it has contributed to the choice of specific strategies for activism.

Personal experience and possession of transferable skills were another important factor in the activists' decision to engage in certain more restricted practices. The same Respondent 6, emphasizing the desire for an authentic representation of people with similar identities, said,

“Why did I choose a podcast? Well, I just like podcasts, I like to talk, and yes, I think this is my strongest side.” She is joined by Respondent 7, who answered the following question about why he is engaged in cyber activism and decided to open a Kazakh channel on Instagram dedicated to LGBTQ+ sex education: “I have good managerial qualities, that is, good communication skills. I can work well with a team, know how to set tasks, control, communicate, and so on. And that's why I do exactly this kind of [cyber] activism.” That is, although activists have an unconditional awareness of the social origin of their work, when it comes to deciding how they will benefit their community, many of them proceed from their own preferences and advantages.

In addition, of course, one cannot fail to mention one more, extremely influential factor – availability and safety. Many of the participants joined LGBTQ+ activism because they saw an opportunity already available to support members of their community in an established organization, as in the case of Respondents 1 and 4, as well as Respondent 3. In particular, Respondent 3 details that he chose outreach work because it seemed to him a kind of “activism in the shadows”:

“I'm kind of not afraid to go against the government, but I was kind of afraid that my family would learn about my sexual orientation. So basically, having my identity hidden from society was essential for me. And it's basically maybe the only way you can do that. Not only actually... but for me it was kind of the way of activism and the results of which you get to see kind of immediately.”

Outreach work thus had its benefits, as it preserved the respondent's privacy and thus protected him from the potential risks of revealing his identity to others or other side effects of engaging in public LGBTQ+ activism, such as hate speech or hate crimes. At the same time, it allowed him

to stay connected to the LGBTQ+ community through conversations with clients, and to see the direct results of his contribution to their well-being.

Taken together, these observations of activist strategies and motivations for choosing them can be taken as evidence of a rebuttal of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, since activists, unlike representatives of a counter-hegemonic culture, do not always consider resistance to dominant norms and groups, and its most effective ways, in their decision to engage in a particular activity. Moreover, many of them do not try to systematically overturn oppressive structures, instead focusing on the distribution of useful or entertaining information for LGBTQ+ people, or smaller cases of discrimination, as is the case with outreach work. However, they are still keenly aware that they exist in a world where they solve the problems of a minority that is oppressed by the state and the majority: this is what Respondent 4 says when talking about “going against the government”, and this is implied by the rest of the respondents too – if the perceived issues were not created by someone, they would not go to solve them. With the imposition of cultural hegemony on the analytical framework of intersectionality, the seemingly absent opposition to the dominant culture begins to dissipate, since it can be divided into symbolic – concerning precisely the harmful ideas about LGBTQ + people – and structural, covering the institutions of their opposition. A glance at the group of activists interviewed reveals that only a few of them are engaged in what can be called structural confrontation, such as Respondent 2's projects or street Pride protests in Respondent 5's case, but certainly all of them, as mentioned in the previous sections, interact with the symbolic dimension of heteronormativity. When they decide to do a podcast about the LGBTQ+ experience or give out medical resources to non-cisheterosexual people, they form an individual interpretation of a social problem: going through their own opinions and physical abilities in terms of skills, this

individual interpretation turns into a choice – the choice not to succumb to the hegemony and make life better for their community in their own way.

**Covertly problematic: Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists' interaction with the country's systemic structures and public majority**

At this stage, the theme of the interaction of LGBTQ+ activists in Kazakhstan with the so-called agents of hegemony, who support the norms of cisheteronormative identity and behavior, and isolate and discriminate against everyone who does not fit into them, should be discussed. In the process of developing the study, two of the most understandable and prominent agents were identified: the systemic structures of the state of Kazakhstan and the cis-heterosexual public majority outside the allies of the LGBTQ+ community. The systemic structures include the government and all its branches – executive, legislative and judicial – as well as the state education and health systems. After analyzing participants' responses to questions on how the aforementioned agents of hegemony influence their activism and how they interact with them, several main patterns have been identified. The very first and most obvious is that, affirming the hegemony framework itself, the activists see themselves as existing and working as an opposition to a larger system of power and authority: frequently encountered code categories are “authorities/government as enemy or opposition” and “rejection by the social majority”. Respondent 1 says that the society and country does not accept LGBTQ+ people and that she would “rather live somewhere in maybe Europe or Australia or something like that”. Respondent 4 notes that the situation with LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan is “very difficult right now” and expresses surprise at the fact that the LGBTQ+ NGO she works for is officially registered. Further trends suggest that, in general, interaction with agents of hegemony occurred in three ways: it did not happen at all, it was negative, or the state helped, but without any

recognition of LGBTQ+ people as a distinct social group experiencing oppression. In fact, most respondents admit that they have not had personal experience of interacting with system structures as an activist: this category includes Respondents 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7. They express sentiments like, “Well, personally I have not had this experience so far” (Respondent 4), “Well, there is no [interaction] with government agencies” (Respondent 7), and “I don't really interact with them because, for example, our NGO, a lot of our partners are either like international organizations or local LGBTQ+ organizations” (Respondent 1). Thus, there is a perceived gap between LGBTQ+ activists and the state in which they operate: this may be due to the fact that the respondents are young and have relatively recently been involved in activism, or because their specific strategies of activism do not fall under the radar of the state as sufficiently opposing or “dangerous” to cisheteronormative hegemony. However, even this lack of interaction, according to some respondents, should be problematized, because it speaks of the indifference of the agents of the hegemony to the existing oppression. Thus, according to Respondent 1, “... the fact that I haven't really had this experience of interacting with government, just to promote my, my LGBTQ+ activism, it also like tells the story that, well, our government is not supportive enough and we are not supported.” Being ignored is just another symptom of hegemony, an attempt to coerce LGBTQ+ people back into cisheteronormativity by pretending their problems and themselves simply don't exist.

This is also evidenced by the cases when the state has worked together with LGBTQ+ activists: judging by the narratives of Respondents 3 and 5, both of whom have experience in outreach work, the government and the healthcare system have taken care of the situation of their LGBTQ+ citizens, but did so problematically. Both respondents note that there is support from the healthcare system:

*Respondent 3:*

“So what's good about Kazakhstan is that there are some recommendations by WHO for how they should conduct protection in Kazakhstan... But Kazakhstan does more than required, it provides PrEP for free to all queer male and trans people and PrEP for free and the treatment for free. And even the migrants can get access to that medicines for free. So basically from the side of the AIDS center and Ministry of Health Care, actually quite a lot of job is done.”

*Respondent 5:*

“There was a person, who, let's say, came from Russia, and he was very surprised that they provide such medical services [to LGBTQ + people], that they are provided free of charge.”

However, as noted by Respondent 3, such support is provided with a number of reservations:

“... it was surprising for me to learn how that information is protected from the public so they wouldn't be protesting against [the government] giving this service... So it is protected from the public: even in the legislation it says target audience, not LGBTQ+ people... And the services were paid by the Ministry of Healthcare and then the Ministry of Internal Services would come, the police, and they will treat queer people like worse than the people in the straight clubs, for example.”

Thus, the government is fulfilling its function as a protector of its citizens, extending this to LGBTQ+ people in the specific area of health care, but does not talk about them directly, avoiding direct confrontation with those who might oppose them, and thereby supporting the prevailing hegemonic trends of homophobia and transphobia. Inconsistencies in the work

between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Internal Affairs indicate that the system has not developed competent answers to what to do with and how to interact with LGBTQ+ people: they are simply covered with an invisibility cloak, while the government is building a state without them.

In addition, of course, despite the lack of personal experience, all the activists have heard about the negative interaction with the systemic structures of Kazakhstan, and they have all faced the rejection of the public majority. Respondent 5 says that the government ignored and, after numerous attempts, rejected his request for an LGBTQ+ people's Pride march. Thus, he confirms the hypothesis that the hegemonic state is indeed hostile and crushes activists' public events that can compromise dominant norms of gender and sexuality. Respondent 2 expresses annoyance that the government does not have grants for social projects that improve the situation of LGBTQ+ people; instead, known homophobic organizations are recognized at the Republican level:

“For example, there's this organization of \*\*\* who are extremely homophobic, who are extremely anti-feminist, um, who are also extremely anti-vaxxers. Um, so yeah, and they have the status of a Republican organization. They are not an NGO as we are. We are not related to the government, but they are because, well, they have this status.”

Additionally, many of the respondents have expressed dissatisfaction with the negligence in the legislature of the country, which does not have a clearly defined statute on non-discrimination of LGBTQ+ people, marriage equality, and hate crimes, and is also perceived as an example of negative attitude of the state. Finally, the public majority has been unanimously hailed as an agent with whom only negative interactions have been had, including aggressive comments and posts to cyber activists, and verbal expressions of disapproval and hatred to activists expressing



their practices and identity in public. Below are some of the respondents' comments on the matter:

*Respondent 2:*

“[The interactions are] Horrible (laughs)... Well, especially the older people are way more homophobic. And, um, yeah, they cross the boundaries of communication. For example, asking, again, intrusive questions that they are not really supposed to know or to ask. It's still a very unaccepting environment. Um, unfortunately, the public majority thinks that they are like, they don't care about our rights or they are against our rights. So yeah, but I think this will change very soon.”

*Respondent 4:*

“For example, young people, they are more open, they already understand that the LGBT community, it also has the right to live in peace, and we do not need to be discriminated against, or discredited. But the older generation, it is still more closed-off. They say that this [LGBTQ+ people] has never happened in Kazakhstan, religion is often dragged in here, and so on. That is, more negativity, it seems to me, comes from the older generation.”

Respondent 7 also noted the hostility of the public majority as one of the reasons for burning out and moving away from activism as his main occupation: “Like, in short, I don't want to waste my resources like this.... In the districts... these people wish me death. Write threats, insults. They write that I am not a Kazakh, that I am like this and that. In short, I've had enough.” There is a general tacit awareness that the public majority is backed and supported by systemic structures, and that together they pose, if not a constant threat to the safety and lives of LGBTQ+ activists,

then at least adversaries to the culture of opposition, which is consistent with Gramsci's theory. Thus, Kazakh LGBTQ+ activists see themselves as being present in an extremely inhospitable environment that they have to navigate in order to contribute to their community. This argument answers the question of whether these activists truly oppose the hegemony, since their very existence and perseverance as counter-figures is a threat to the state that has not developed an adequate response either to extinguish their efforts or to give in and support them. It is difficult to answer how effective such a confrontation is, since in the absence of much explicit interaction and with restrictive legalization, the situation looks stagnant. The activists themselves, however, as shown by the example of Respondent 2 and 4, believe in change for the better. They cite age and socioeconomic status, as well as differences between urban and rural environments, as factors influencing the potential bigotry of the public, and say that this will soon improve.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study has found that activist identity among LGBTQ+ activists in Kazakhstan has a huge impact on how they conduct their work to improve the situation of non-cisheterosexual people in the country. Based on the analysis of the data, it can be concluded that LGBTQ+ activists construct their identity based on a set of intersectional social markers, the central basis of which is their non-cis-heterosexuality, turning it into a separate facet and perspective as more privileged representatives of their community. They manifest this multi-layered identity primarily through resistance to symbolic hegemonic norms, focusing on helping on the ground and changing the narrative about LGBTQ+ people in a range of strategies more than a structural upheaval of the institutions of oppression. They also experience disconnection in their interaction with agents of cisheteronormative hegemony, either being ignored by them due to their possible short-term existence and scale, meeting hostility on all levels of organization, or receiving resources without

their apparent existence being recognized. Thus, activists are acutely aware of identity in general, and construct their own using its various markers: this includes notably gender and sexuality markers, but also ethnicity, class, nationality, and others. According to their answers and Collins' theory of intersectionality, the activist identity can be defined as an extension of a specific identity that prompts entry into activism – in this case, identity of a non-cisheterosexual – but becomes a separate identity over time and interacts with the rest in a constant relationship of symbiosis and prioritization. The main motivations for joining the activist ranks are anger, personal struggle, and privilege; they ultimately lead activists to position themselves as top-down contributors, and present themselves as helping from both a place of resources and relative power, and experience as the oppressed. Activists join the LGBTQ+ movement through informal and formal offline and online networks that function as a place of community and self-acceptance, as well as spaces for gaining skills and resources for mobilization. This mobilization also often occurs intersectionally, with activists coming into the LGBTQ+ movement from feminist, political, and other types of activism, and at times conducting work encompassing all these spheres. Regarding activist strategies, these are based on identities and social markers, yet shaped by other factors external to identity as well. These factors include research, personal experience, transferable skills, availability and safety, and show how many activists engage with the symbolic hegemony through individual interpretation and choice by subverting and resisting it. In terms of recommendations for future research on the topic, this project hopes to have been able to demonstrate the value of an activist perspective on LGBTQ+ people in Kazakhstan; to expand scholarship and knowledge on it, it is proposed to conduct quantitative research to complement the qualitative findings. Additionally, the topics of the activists' interaction with the state structures, and the networks of communication among them deserve special attention and

separate focused in-depth studies being conducted on them. Finally, it is proposed to replicate the study with some revisions, including adding a questionnaire in Kazakh language and rephrasing some of the questions to have more precise implications, in order to achieve more representative results and potentially involve a larger range of activists, with more different identities and backgrounds.

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## Appendix A

### **Interview guide – English version**

1. Could you please start by telling me a bit about yourself? Name, age, occupation...

*Follow-up question:* How and when did you find out about LGBTQ+ activism in Kazakhstan?

2. Could you please tell me your story of joining LGBTQ+ activism?
3. Why do you think you have become an LGBTQ+ activist? What would you say were your main motivations?
4. What problems did you see as most urgent and intended to solve when you first started your activist work?
5. How would you say you identify yourself?
6. Do you identify yourself as an activist, LGBTQ+ person, Kazakhstani, a combination of several of those, or in another way?
7. Why do you identify yourself as...? Why not like...?
8. What factors have influenced and continue to influence how you identify yourself? For example, your activism, family, friends, school/workplace, community, social class... (If the respondent does not bring this up themselves)
9. What does “being an LGBTQ+ activist” mean to you?

*Follow-up question:* Do you think there are certain criteria/characteristics that define an LGBTQ+ activist?



10. Please tell me about your experience as an LGBTQ+ person in Kazakhstan.

11. Please tell me about your experience as an LGBTQ+ activist in Kazakhstan.

Follow-up question: Do you think this experience is different from the experience of an LGBTQ+ person in Kazakhstan who is not an activist? How?

12. What strategies do you use in your activism? In other words, how exactly do you conduct your work as an LGBTQ+ activist (what do you do as an activist)?

13. Was the choice of your specific methods of activism conscious for you? If so, why did you decide to engage in activism in these particular ways/through these specific practices?

*Follow-up question:* Do you find yourself basing your activism exclusively on your gender identity/sexuality? Or do you feel that other parts of your identity (e.g. social class, language of speech, ethnicity, etc.) influence your activism as well? If so, which ones and how?

14. How do you think the public majority and systemic structures in Kazakhstan (e.g. the government, legislature, education system, healthcare system, etc.) influence your LGBTQ+ activism?

*Follow-up question:* How would you describe your interaction with the public majority in Kazakhstan? How would you describe your interaction with the aforementioned systemic structures of Kazakhstan?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add on the topic – anything you feel the need to?

## Appendix B

### Form of Oral Consent – English version

#### Introduction

Hello! My name is Liliya Mukhamejanova, and I am inviting you to participate in a research study entitled *Champions of Marginality: Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ rights activists' identity and experience as contentious contributors to the welfare of society*, which will be a capstone project for my Bachelor studies in Sociology, School of Sciences and Humanities, Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan.

I located your name by recruiting respondents via research announcement messages in WhatsApp and Telegram/ having your name suggested to me by other respondents or people who know about LGBTQ+ people's situation in Kazakhstan/ searching for publicly active Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists.

#### Procedures

I am inviting you to do an interview that will take approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The interview will ask you questions about *your experience as an LGBTQ+ person, your self-identification as an LGBTQ+ activist, and the activist strategies you use to promote your cause in Kazakhstan* such as “Could you tell us your story about joining LGBTQ+ activism?”, “What does ‘being an LGBTQ+ activist’ mean to you?”, and “How exactly do you conduct your work as an LGBTQ+ activist?”.

The purpose of this capstone project is to explore the ways in which Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists talk about their experience of dealing with social issues of homophobia and transphobia

and their process of self-identification as ‘activists’ within theories of intersectionality; it will also apply the theory of cultural hegemony to analyze motivations and strategies of their activism. The main research question is as follows: how do Kazakhstani LGBTQ+ activists construct and present their activist identity and manifestation of it in their activist work as members of a marginalized group opposing the state-supported cultural norms on gender and sexuality?

The project will use online and offline semi-structured interviews of self-identified LGBTQ+ activists in order to collect their experiences, and perform thematic narrative analysis to establish main patterns and findings framed under the mentioned theories of intersectionality and cultural hegemony. A tentative conclusion will be developed, and main points of limitation and recommendation for further research determined before the study’s results will be presented before the members of the university’s sociology department, and submitted in written format for evaluation.

### **Risks**

The potential risk of participating in this study includes a breach of confidentiality. Due to the nature and the goal of the research, several identifying features of the participant, e.g. their age, gender, nationality, occupation, ethnicity, and sexuality may be shared in the publication without any mentions of their name. The identifying features will be kept to a minimum and used only according to the necessities of the theoretical analysis applied in the study.

### **Benefits**

It is unlikely that there will be direct benefits to you; however, by better understanding *the social group of LGBTQ+ activists in Kazakhstan, their self-positionality, and their motivations and*

*strategies in their activist work*, researchers and others may be able to identify and document common patterns in the ways in which activists, and in particular LGBTQ+ activists, navigate their life and work, and understand the intersections of their identities, and apply their findings to propose appropriate solutions to the issue of discrimination of LGBTQ+ community in this educational facility (NU), Kazakhstan, and elsewhere in the world.

### **Voluntary Participation**

§ Your participation in this study is voluntary.

§ You can decide to stop at any time, even partway through the questionnaire for whatever reason.

§ If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.

§ If you decide to stop, the researcher will ask you how you would like the data collected up to that point to be handled.

§ This could include returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.

§ If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

§ If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can call or email Liliya Mukhamejanova at 87074627154 or [liliya.mukhamejanova@nu.edu.kz](mailto:liliya.mukhamejanova@nu.edu.kz).

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee

E-mail: resethics@nu.edu.kz.

### **Compensation**

No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study upon your wish to see them – it can be sent to you via email or other electronic means.

### **Confidentiality & Privacy**

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by the law. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. All records and data will be kept by the researcher and accessed only by the researcher themselves and their capstone instructor. The researcher will keep the information you tell during the interview confidential. Information the researcher puts in the final report that could identify you will not be published or shared beyond the research team unless your permission is obtained. You are also advised not to use your real name or other people's names during the interview; if any name is mentioned, it will be replaced with a code or a nickname in the process of converting the audio recording into text and remain hidden at all further stages of the study. Any data from this research which will be shared or published will either be the combined data of all participants, or mention the participant using a special code name with as few identifying characteristics as possible.

### **Consent questions:**

- Do you have any questions or would like any additional details?
- Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw at any point with no consequences to you?