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Explaining unwelcoming attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu and their implications for regional cultural change

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the predictors of the unwelcoming attitude toward staging LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu, Romania. Building on recent insights on festivals as socially sustainable devices contributing to tourism and cultural changes and based on an original survey dataset, we use logistic regression to account for this negative view. Our findings indicate that gender, education, and religiosity are associated with the outcome variable. Men, respondents with up to lower secondary education, and people who self-identify as religious are more inclined to oppose LGBTQI+ festivals, whereas festivalgoers and respondents who have a positive attitude toward Roma festivals are less likely to hold negative views on LGBTQI+ festivals. Likewise, beliefs that the state shall regulate the cultural realm and that tourists contribute to a positive image of Sibiu are positively associated with the unwelcoming attitude toward LGBTQI+ festivals. These findings have policy implications for framing cultural changes in central Romania.

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Introduction

There is a growing body of literature documenting the impact of LGBTQI+ festivals on the production of inclusive communities through the creation of social bonds enabling inhabitants of one's place to express their subjectivity and connect with others in meaningful and creative ways, irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation (Coetzee, 2023; Kaygalak-Celebi et al., 2020; Ong et al., 2021). Most often this literature is disproportionately framed within the tourism research emphasizing the contribution of such events to the higher attractiveness of a destination associated with important economic gains, while downplaying the social and political aspects motivating festival attendance (Mulder & Hitters, 2021). The social dimension of an event taking place in a particular context is a co-constitutive element of the sustainability of that place and of the community inhabiting it. While the social equity issue framing the inclusivity of an event is of utmost importance for sustainable tourism development, it has usually been overridden by the attention paid to the economic outcomes and environmental

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concerns that often take precedence over the social embedding of the event (Getz, 2009; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). In particular, in heteronormative and conservative places such as Sibiu, a medium-sized town situated in central Romania that has increasingly grown as a tourist attraction since its designation as the European Capital of Culture in 2007, the potential for challenging the unwelcoming attitudes toward gender queer identities and sexual minorities through the staging of dedicated festivals is even more important because such events have a transformative power in that they represent counterspaces in which marginalized groups can adaptively react to oppression by the dominant group and affirm their own identities outside of regular settings that would elicit more aggressive reactions by mainstream groups. In time, the serial organization of LGBTQI+ festivals could help reduce the heteronormative bias and prejudice toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other sexually and gender diverse individuals (LGBTQI+) in the community. However, this would not result in implicit acceptance and increased tolerance of gender and sexual minorities without outright actions taken by policy-makers, festival organizers, and other stakeholders' support. For social change to take place, purposefully tailored measures need to be put in place and targeted toward groups that uphold the negative sentiments toward LGBTQI+ people. Therefore, the investigation of sociocultural drivers of adverse attitudes toward the organization of festivals celebrating gender and sexual diversity is of real importance in tackling the hostility of communities with respect to queer identities.

The extant literature in this field has documented the experiences of LGBTQI+ festival attendees and the specific economic and political challenges faced by the organizers of queer events in different places, but so far, no study has dealt with the attitudes of the general public in places where LGBTQI+ festivals have not yet been initiated. The aim of this paper is to examine the factors associated with the inhospitable attitude toward LGBTQI+ festivals to suggest policy implication for reducing prejudice against sexual minorities and allow for more inclusive communities. The value of this study lies in its contribution to the literature of festival studies from the angle of social justice by focusing on the variability in the general public's negative views on LGBTQI+ festivals in a Romanian town with a highly conservative tradition, multiethnic social legacy, and complex stratification that has become a popular tourist destination in recent years. Local residents' attitudes and their participation in the decision-making related to cultural festivals are of crucial importance for local communities' wellbeing.

Festivals as sociocultural events triggering local change and sustainable development

The political power of LGBTQI+ festivals

The political power of queer events has been illustrated in various case studies in Europe showing the capacity of different stakeholders to collectively organize, find autonomous queer spaces and mobilize volunteers in seeking to advance inclusive politics and produce social change (Eleftheriadis, 2015). Recent research in Australia (Vorobjovas-Pinta et al., 2024) also evidences the critical role of organizers of rural LGBTQI+ festivals in mobilizing collective action to help LGBTQI+ people resist marginalization and alienation through facilitating their connection during celebratory events that foster inclusivity and mutual respect for different identities, without ignoring the emerging tensions

between different preferences of heterosexuals and various LGBTQI+ subgroups that may not be equally represented within a local cultural event.

Festivals are usually designed and represented as pleasure-centered events that people attend in their search for joy and fun. However, regardless of their orientation toward art, food, ethnicity, or other identity dimension they seek to celebrate, festivals have intricate political stakes and leisure underpinnings, and this dialectic of “pleasure-politics” opens new ways to resist ideologies, enables social change, and gives rise to political action in order to dismantle power hierarchies and achieve more social equity (Sharpe, 2008). In the case of LGBTQI+ festivals, there is an implicit political agenda because they are often conceived as civil struggles toward social emancipation and greater acceptance of gender and sexual minorities. Their transformative power has been illustrated recently in research that has been gathered in a dedicated special issue based on evidence from small-scale events celebrating various sexual identities (Coetzee, 2023). One of the articles in the special issue mentioned above deals with the relevance of the embedment of LGBTQI+ events in small-size locales, which is a rather new and consequential phenomenon that should be recognized. Ammaturo (2023) shows that little research has been conducted in Europe so far on the impact of pride events organized in small towns and peripheral locations. In her comparative study on LGBTQI+ events staged in Italy and the United Kingdom, she draws on the concepts of *hyper-localization* and *hyper-contextualization*, which are understood as two interconnected processes of rapid multiplication of global pride events in remote areas and, respectively, the alteration of meanings of these events using local identity repertoires.

The configuration of queer events varies from political marches in places where LGBTQI+ communities suffer from greater adversity to festive or carnival-like events in locales where LGBTQI+ festivals have become institutionalized. Challenging the “metronormative bias” (Halberstam, 2005) of queer research that has too often been entrenched in large urban settings generally conceived of as more emancipatory contexts enabling the flourishing of queer events. More recently, Ammaturo (2023, p. 226) demonstrates that the replication of these pride events translating and adapting the global gay identity (Altman, 1992) in small towns of Italy and the United Kingdom is “crucial to showcase the uniqueness of the local LGBTQI+ communities whilst, simultaneously, challenging stereotypes and fighting homo-transphobia at the local level.”

Sustainable development in festivals’ literature

In line with Getz’s (2009, p. 70), we consider cultural events’ sustainability not only in terms of their perpetuation, but also in the way they “fulfil important social, cultural, economic and environmental roles that people value.” Notwithstanding the problematic raise in the conceptualization of festivals as tourist attractions capable of generating incomes and contributing to place-branding, several authors point to the core dimension of festivals as a manifestation of public celebration of shared beliefs and values by more-or-less fluid communities (Bankston & Henry, 2000; Perry et al., 2020; Quinn, 2006). Their main reason for existence lies in their social, aesthetic, and political underpinnings, and their underlying function is often instrumentalized by tourist business operators and other stakeholders as commodified cultural activities generating income and driving economic growth. The link between festivals and tourism has become implicit because many

festivals are nowadays oriented toward attracting external audiences alongside locals' involvement. LGBTQI+ festivals are among the most illustrative in this regard because they attract people from remote places who seek to express their identity in temporary gatherings with like-minded individuals without fearing judgmental and outrageous public reactions (Browne, 2007; Kaygalak-Celebi et al., 2020; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021).

Building on the insights from geographical research on festivals and carnivals seen as manifestations that challenge the social structure and norms and ideologies that are responsible for the power inequalities in access to resources, Quinn (2006, p. 290) shows that the contribution of festivals to tourism's sustainable practices rests in their potential as "socially sustaining devices." The latter aspect refers to an attribute of festivals understood as celebratory events through which communities gain a sense of social connection and belonging rather than an exclusionary event that addresses only the aesthetic taste and leisure needs of a small elite. Comparative research in local contexts based on samples of respondents who attended/did not attend LGBTQI+ festivals shows that there are both individual and community benefits of participating in such festivals (e.g. perceived community well-being, access to new ideas, personal sense of pride, feelings of solidarity) (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Pearce, 2024). Likewise, qualitative exploratory research in rural Australia (Lockett & Lewis, 2023) points to the positive impact of inaugural LGBTQI+ events triggered by the collective consciousness of communities that are prompted to reflect upon their prejudiced attitudes and beliefs against gender and sexual minorities.

Festival organizers can play an important role in stimulating the inclusive participation of different categories of locals and tourists, while also proposing educational workshops on social justice for the attendees in order to enable them to ponder over issues of economic disadvantage, interethnic relations, and gender inequalities (Laing & Mair, 2015). Festivals can then facilitate communities' capacity building through enhanced social interaction by creating networks, building solidarities and bridging ties between diverse people within celebratory settings where judgmental pressure is softened. Starting from such considerations, we address the need to understand the unwelcoming attitudes of inhabitants of Sibiu, a medium-sized town located in a touristic area of central Romania that has not yet hosted LGBTQI+ festivals.

National and regional contexts: conservatism and heteronormativity

Thus far, no pride parade or LGBTQI+ festivals have been organized in Sibiu. Within contemporary Romanian society, conservatism and a limited openness toward sexual minorities are prominent features. Several factors contribute to this situation. During the communist era, all types of sexual minorities were negatively discriminated against and legally condemned to imprisonment (Turcescu & Stan, 2005). This is believed to have had adverse effects on the morality of the society that the Romanian Communist Party aimed to construct. The Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, coordinated by Tismaneanu (2006), mentions cases in which the communist security apparatus used the initiation of homosexuality trials as a means of blackmail against individuals who did not fully conform to the party's ideology. Starting from 1989, following the fall of communist leadership in Romania, gradual changes began to take place, and in 2001 homosexuality was decriminalized as part of the Romania's preparation to join the European Union in 2007. However, it took 15 years since then for the first pride march dedicated to

sexual minorities to be organized in Bucharest (GayFest 2004). Subsequently, similar events have been held in the capital almost annually, and more recently in Cluj-Napoca, the second-largest city in Romania. These events led to discussions about sexual minorities taking place in the public sphere and mass media, with strong opposition to such marches and festivals (Woodcock, 2016). On numerous occasions, counter-demonstrations were organized, and incidents of violence occurred, leading to a growing divide in public opinion between those who condemned public demonstrations by sexual minorities and those who believed that such expressions should be accepted or supported. The high level of homophobia in Romania compared with other Member States is demonstrated by the results of the Special Eurobarometer 493 – “Discrimination in the European Union,” which shows that only a minority of Romanians (38%) agree that sexual minorities shall enjoy the same rights as heterosexual people, whereas the majority of people in Sweden (98%) and the Netherlands (97%) agree with this statement (European Commission, 2019). A significant portion of Romanian society’s aversion toward sexual minorities reached its peak visibility when a citizen initiative with approximately 3 million signatures was submitted to amend the Romanian constitution. In short, the aim was to change the constitutional definition of a family to explicitly state that only the union between a man and a woman is recognized, excluding same-sex partnerships. To this end, a national referendum was organized in 2018. Despite the constitutional amendment not being introduced due to the failure to meet the quorum required for constitutional changes, over 90% of those who participated in the vote supported the proposed constitutional amendment. At the same time, according to the Eurobarometer (2019), the majority of Romanians consider sexual minorities to be less suitable for public leadership positions. Over 50% of Romanians would not be comfortable if such a person were elected to the highest public office and view such persons as undesirable romantic partners for their own children (approximately 60% of Romanians would not be comfortable if one of their children were in a romantic relationship with a person from this category).

Within this national context, Sibiu represents a region that reflects some of the aforementioned national characteristics but that also possesses specific features worthy of consideration. The region has a multiethnic cultural heritage, which is evident in its demographic composition, public and private architecture, education preferences by a significant share of the ethnic Romanian population for German-speaking schools, and the active role played by the Lutheran Evangelical Church in the social life of local inhabitants that aims to build cross-cultural bridges between the different ethnic communities of Sibiu (Oltean, 2019).

Since 2007, when the city held the title of European Capital of Culture for a year, and owing to a series of annual international festivals that started even earlier (e.g. Sibiu International Theatre Festival, Astra–Sibiu International Film Festival), the touristic dimension of the city has been gradually strengthened. Tourism is one of the main economic drivers of the city, and the number of tourists has steadily increased in recent years (albeit temporarily reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic). Recently, the National Institute of Statistics (2022) officially estimates an annual number of over 500,000 tourists in Sibiu, with approximately 10% being foreign tourists. In a recent study, Rusu (2023, p. 31) reveals that over 70% of Sibiu’s residents agree with the statement that Sibiu’s image as a cultural city is authentic, and this belief is further instrumentalized through local tourism politics seeking to attract more tourists and increase the economic and symbolic capital of the town by commodifying

the local cultural heritage, both tangible (e.g. material objects, statues, churches, castles) and intangible (e.g. festivals, ceremonies, traditions, dances, local food). Among these elements, there is high pressure to maintain the heteronormative order and limit the presence of sexual minorities in the public space and within the cultural agenda of the city.

Data and methods

Our study is based on an original dataset consisting of 930 observations collected from April to June 2023 with the help of a self-administered questionnaire aiming to document Sibiu inhabitants' attitudes and views with respect to various aspects related to local festivals and tourists' behavior. Our primary research objective is the analysis of factors influencing the negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu. This study is an integral part of a more extensive research endeavor, which seeks to comprehend the attitudes of the local population toward cultural heritage and the impact of its heritagization and consumption on community's well-being. Data collection was organized within the context of the ELABCHROM research project. The questionnaire was designed for this specific research project and included sections with items related to cultural heritage and local identity, festivals and cultural events, representation, and commodification of heritage through cultural events, as well as sociodemographic variables. The questionnaire opens with relatively neutral questions and inquiries concerning cultural consumption behaviors. Questions regarding the opportunity of organizing LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu were placed toward the end of the questionnaire to ensure a low rate of discontinuation caused by respondents feeling uncomfortable or disturbed.

The questionnaire was disseminated across various social media platforms, email lists, and calls for respondents on local news platforms, among other channels. Informed consent was required by respondents who, by agreeing to fill in the questionnaire, were approving their willingness to anonymously participate in the survey coordinated by a team of sociologists from the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. The study received ethical approval from the university's ethical committee. Primary emphasis during data collection was placed on ensuring a sufficiently diverse sample to explore relationships between variables, and the final sample was weighted to mirror the population's gender and age structure. We used a logistic regression model to identify statistically significant predictors for negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. Missing data was deleted, resulting in a final sample containing 922 cases.

Results

Table 1 presents all the variables introduced in the study, details about the measurements, mean values, and standard deviations. In the study, the dependent variable captures the negative attitudes toward the organization of LGBTQI+ festivals and is measured through the aggregation of responses from individuals who believe that organizing festivals dedicated to sexual minorities is wrong or very wrong. The analysis of the mean value indicates that 46% of the sample hold such negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals and consider their organization in Sibiu to be wrong. In order to explain these negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals by local population, we use a number of demographic and attitudinal variables that are discussed below.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Name of the variable	Description of the variable and measurement	Mean	SD
Dependent variable (DV)			
Negative attitudes toward queer festivals	Negative attitudes toward the organization of queer festivals (individuals who believe that organizing festivals dedicated to sexual minorities is wrong or very wrong).	0,46	0,498
Independent variables (IVs)			
Attendance to existent festivals	Summative index for participation in local festivals in the last two years (from 0 to 5, where 0 means no participation at all, and 5 means maximum diversity and attendance).	2,25	1,689
Diversity of the local festivals	Assessment of the diversity of locally organized festivals (from 1 to 5, where 1 means a very low level of diversity, and 5 means a very high level of diversity).	3,48	0,823
State as a cultural regulator	Agreement with the idea that the state should regulate the cultural sphere of the community (from 1 to 5, where 1 means strong disagreement with the idea, and 5 means strong agreement).	4,15	1,025
Tourists contribute to a good image of the locality	Agreement with the idea that tourists visiting Sibiu contribute to its positive image (1–5, where 1 means strong disagreement with the idea, and 5 means strong agreement).	4,67	0,643
Attitudes toward Roma festivals	Considering the reality in Sibiu, what do you think about organizing festivals dedicated to the Roma ethnic group? (On a scale of 1–5, where 1 means this is very wrong and 5 means this is very good).	3,56	0,904
Self-assessed religiosity	Regardless of whether you attend church or not, how religious do you consider yourself? (On a scale of 1–5, where 1 means not religious at all and 5 means very religious).	3,59	1,016
Age	Age (number of years).	48,64	16,798
Gender	Male (where 0 means No and 1 means Yes).	0,47	0,499
Rural	Residence in rural area (where 0 means No and 1 means Yes).	0,19	0,398
Education	Individual's level of education – three categories	Percentage	
		Education level up to lower-secondary – without completing high school	18,7%
		Education level up to upper-secondary – with completion of high school or postsecondary school	35,5%
		Tertiary education	45,8%

Source: ELABCHROM research project; authors' elaboration.

First, the variable measuring the individual evaluations of the diversity of locally staged festivals (i.e. “the diversity of local festivals”) is an indicator that reflects the subjective perception with respect to the level of diversity of festivals organized in Sibiu on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating that individuals perceive the diversity to be high. The average value of 3.48 suggests a moderate-to-high level of perceived diversity, even though there are no LGBTQI+ festivals locally.

Another variable capturing participation in different categories of festivals was computed by creating a summative index that measures how many festival types individuals have attended in the past two years. The questionnaire presented a list that included festivals dedicated to theater, music, film, and gastronomy, as well as the category “other.” Each respondent answered whether they had participated in such festivals, and by summing up the affirmative responses, an individual score ranging from 0 to 5 was obtained, where 0 = no festival attendance within the prior years, and 5 = attendance of all festival categories listed above. The mean value of 2.25 indicates that, at the sample level, people have participated on average in two types of festivals during the previous two years (i.e. 2021 and 2022).

The indicator labeled “State as a cultural regulator” reflects individual level of agreement (1 = strong disagreement, 5 = total agreement), with the idea that the state or authorities should intervene to regulate the cultural sphere of the community. In a country with a communist legacy like Romania, where the state’s (and party’s) authorities used to strongly regulate and censor cultural life, this indicator provides insight into how this pattern of state intervention is still perceived as an adequate form of cultural governance in the collective mindset. In the context of the national description provided, it was demonstrated that the communist cultural model was heteronormative and homosexuality was morally and legally condemned. At the sample level, the average value of 4.15 indicates expectations for the state to regulate cultural life are widespread.

The level of agreement with the idea that “Tourists contribute to a good image of the locality” is useful for understanding what locals think about the function of tourism. Measured on a five-point scale ranging from total disagreement to full agreement, the mean value of 4.67 reflects a high level of support by Sibiu’s inhabitants for the idea that tourists play a positive role in promoting the image of their town. The high level of agreement with this statement implies that festivals and events organized for tourists are indeed part of the normative discourse about who the locals are and how they want to present themselves to others. The agreement with this statement also contains the possibility of using cultural events such as festivals to positively shape the image of their community in tourists’ eyes.

To explain the variation in the attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals, we also introduce the variable capturing the subjective view of respondents toward ethnic minorities such as Roma because this group has a long history of discrimination and prejudice in Romanian society. The mean value of 3.56 indicates a moderate-to-high level of openness toward Roma festivals. As prior research shows, discrimination toward sexual minorities is associated with prejudice toward other marginalized categories (Ong et al., 2021). Therefore, we expect that people who hold a positive view on Roma festivals have a lower likelihood of harboring negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals.

Religiosity is one of the most important aspects shaping people’s feelings in relation to sexuality and marriage. In a relatively religiously homogeneous country (approximately 85% of those who declared their religion in the 2021 census are Orthodox Christians) and where over 90% of those surveyed believe in god (World Values Survey, 2018), we opted for a five-point scale on which individuals could self-position themselves in terms of religiosity. Seeing as higher values mirror a higher level of self-assessed religiosity, the mean of 3.59 indicates a moderate-to-high level of religiosity within the sample.

Our analysis also controls for the effects of sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, area of residence, and education that are commonly considered in social research. At the sample level, the age of respondents ranges from 18 to 83 years, with a mean age of approximately 49 years. The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with about 47% of the survey participants identified as male, whereas 53% identified as female. The questionnaire also included a third option (i.e. nonbinary) that could be chosen by those who identify neither as male nor as female, but this option was selected by only two individuals and therefore the category could not be included in the statistical analyses because of insufficient observations. Regarding the area of residence, the sample encompassed approximately 19% of individuals residing in rural areas. Given that the economic and sociocultural discrepancies between rural and urban areas are still considerable in Romania (Sandu, 2011), and these inequalities shape also people access to cultural events, we expected higher opposition from people living in rural areas of the Sibiu region toward the organization of LGBTQI+ festivals because this could be perceived as a threat toward the conservative values of traditional family and conventional sexual and romantic relationships between men and women. Finally, the education indicator was measured in a way that allows us to compare those with an education up to lower-secondary level without completing high school (19%) and those with an education up to upper-secondary level with completion of high school or postsecondary school (36%) against the reference category of respondents with tertiary education (45%).

The logistic regression model indicates a series of strong significant associations between individuals' negative attitudes toward organizing LGBTQI+ festivals and the set of predictors discussed above. The predictive power of the model is substantial, with a Nagelkerke *R* square of 0.25 and an improvement in correct classification of cases from 53.6% to 66.4%.

First, the statistically significant negative relationship ($p < 0.01$) between prior attendance to existing festivals and the outcome variable demonstrates that individuals who have attended multiple festivals in the last two years are less likely to hold negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. Second, the statistically significant positive relationship ($p < 0.01$) between the evaluation of the diversity of festival offerings and the dependent variable indicates that those satisfied with the current diversity are more likely to have negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. Third, the higher approval of the role of state as a cultural regulator significantly increases the probability of having negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals, but the statistical significance level is lower ($p < 0.1$).

The agreement with the statement that tourists contribute to a good image of the region is also associated with our dependent variable ($p < 0.05$). The probability of having negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals is higher among those who perceive tourism's role in promoting a positive image of the region.

In Romania, attitudes toward Roma festivals are a significant predictor for (un)welcoming attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities festivals. The negative association is strongly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals who have positive perceptions of Roma festivals are less likely to hold negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. On the contrary, respondents who self-perceive as religious tend to support the view that the organization of LGBTQI+ festivals is wrong ($p < 0.01$). Likewise, age is positively associated with the unwelcoming attitude toward LGBTQI+ festivals and is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Within the range of 18–83, each additional year in age

increases the odds of having negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. Moreover, our findings show that men have higher odds than women of having negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals, and the relationship is strongly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). As expected, respondents living in rural areas are more inclined toward expressing negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals, with this association also being statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Finally, education is also important within our model. Compared to those with tertiary education (i.e. the reference category), individuals with an education level up to lower-secondary (without a high-school diploma) have statistically significant higher odds to be among people with negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. However, there are no significant differences between those who completed high school and those holding a university degree.

Discussion

These findings are particularly telling when situated in a sociohistorical and cultural context. Sibiu is a medium-sized town of around 130,000 inhabitants with a rich cultural heritage, given its legacy of Saxon traditions along those of Romanian, Roma, and Hungarian populations. These ethnic groups and their distinctive religious, linguistic, and other cultural features do not enjoy public presence or celebration on an equal footing. Likewise, sexually diverse minorities face even greater challenges of public recognition and general acceptance. As pointed out by Ong et al. (2021), in Australian society, which is marked by similar dominant values of traditional masculine identity and the ensuing heteronormative hierarchies of sexual and gender identities, the organization of LGBTQI+ events has the potential to challenge the ritualized practices of celebrating dominant heterosexual groups while neglecting or silencing subordinate queer groups. Our survey respondents who declared they have participated in various types of festivals in the last two years are less inclined to hold negative views toward the organization of LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu. This finding suggests that participation in diverse cultural festivals such as music, theater, film, and food can sensitize festival goers, contributing to declining prejudice levels against sexual minorities' dedicated events in Sibiu. Echoing the findings by Koenig-Lewis et al. (2021), our tentative explanation for this result is that festivalgoers might engage emotionally and cognitively with the content of the exhibitions and performances of the festivals they attend. In turn, their engagement shapes their post-festival attitudes and affects sustainable community development because LGBTQI+ festivals could be an avenue toward including other aesthetic and political issues of their hometown agenda they feel are not yet considered by local political actors, grassroot associations, or the public. Unlike festivalgoers, our findings suggest that respondents who perceive that local festivals are culturally diverse enough tend to manifest opposition toward the organization of LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu. The subjective assessment with respect to the degree of diversity of cultural events is associated with the tendency to harbor adverse attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. There is evidence in the literature that cultural policies directed at the general public's openness toward reflecting new ideas and participating in innovative art festivals could affect their acceptance of LGBTQI+ festivals at the local level. Following Quinn's (2006) findings relating to the flourishing of art festivals in Ireland that stimulated the local creativity of the population and their participation in and taste for new arts, one can expect that greater exposure to more

diverse cultural events could foster awareness about underexplored social, aesthetic, and political aspects.

Our findings also suggest a positive association between respondents' higher level of endorsement of the belief that the state should regulate the communities' events related to the cultural realm and the unwelcoming attitudes toward LGBTQI+ events taking place in their town. This could be interpreted in the light of communist legacies of a public patriarchy in which the state acted as a gatekeeper and final authority for judging the aesthetic and social value of every cultural manifestation or outcome that was subordinated to the ultimate goal of preserving the traditional patriarchal family in a heteronormative social order (Miroiu, 2004; Pasti, 2003). Likewise, the stronger the agreement of respondents that tourists visiting Sibiu contribute to its positive image the more likely they are to hold a negative view on the opportunity to organize LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu. One possible underlying mechanism supporting such an association is that messages delivered to tourists by the existing cultural infrastructure are contributing to the positive role of tourists regarding the promotion of Sibiu, which could be negatively affected by LGBTQI+ festivals taking place in Sibiu. The dominant view regarding cultural attractions in Sibiu and surrounding areas is represented by the importance of historical heritage and, in the post-socialist years, the International Theatre Festival, which celebrated its 30th edition in 2023 and has greatly contributed to the place-branding of Sibiu. Following this perception by locals of tourists being interested in architectural heritage and more conventional festive events, the respondents might consider that LGBTQI+ festivals could alter tourists' positive image of Sibiu.


One of the largest effects in terms of lowering the negative view of locals about LGBTQI+ festivals is related to the positive attitudes of respondents toward Roma festivals. This indicates that respondents who feel that other festivals dedicated to marginalized groups in society such as Roma are less likely to oppose the organization of festivals celebrating sexual diversity in Sibiu. Such an association resonates with similar findings from the literature based on social dominance theory (Sidanius et al., 2004), which shows that individuals hold different levels of prejudices against other subordinate groups depending on their positionality within the social hierarchy and, therefore, acceptance of certain subordinate groups such as ethnic minorities could facilitate the tolerance of other socially excluded groups like LGBTQI+. In Romania, barometer data on discrimination and hate speech (IRES, 2019) reveals similar prejudice levels toward Roma and sexual-orientation minorities, with 74% of Romanians reporting a lack of trust in homosexuals and 72% reporting a distrustful attitude toward Roma ethnics. This lends support to the result we have found, indicating that those who are willing to accept some excluded minorities could show tolerance toward other groups facing similar levels of exclusion (Ong et al., 2021).

Respondents self-identifying as religious are more likely to harbor negative feelings toward LGBTQI+ festivals. This result echoes findings from the wider literature documenting the relationship between homophobic sentiments and religiousness. For instance, based on the European Social Survey data, which includes 43 countries, Doebler (2015) shows that religious people, regardless of their denominational affiliation, tend to display higher levels of homonegativity compared with the nonreligious population, but this homonegativity is stronger among the Orthodox and Muslims. However, this effect is not uniform across Orthodox countries because there is significant cross-national variation in the institutional organization of churches, their political and state integration,

and their reputation. This arguably affects the power of Orthodox churches to influence the beliefs and attitudes of their believers. A comparative research on Orthodox countries such as Romania and Bulgaria sheds light on the higher effect of religiousness on the level of homophobic sentiments among Romanian believers compared with their Bulgarian counterparts (Spina, 2016). This is due to the more solidified moral authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church and its influential elites, who are more effective in conveying homophobic sentiments given that this institution enjoys higher confidence of its members and the credibility of religious leaders compared with Bulgarian Orthodox elites. Likewise, other comparative studies in East Europe confirm that the Orthodox Church in Romania has far-reaching consequences in shaping the homonegativity of their believers, whereas in Hungary the Catholics have displayed a declining trend in homophobic sentiments in recent years (Takács & Szalma, 2019).

The sociodemographic variables included in our regression model also bring insights into the variation of unwelcoming attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu. Older respondents do appear as more intolerant of such events, and this finding is in line with the results of other research on homophobic attitudes in Romania (Spina, 2016; Takács & Szalma, 2019). Likewise, respondents from rural areas are less likely to approve the organization of LGBTQI+ festivals. Rural areas in Romania are still characterized by a sociocultural and economic disadvantage compared to urban areas, even if research shows that this discrepancy is lower in the Transylvanian region (Sandu, 2011). Rural inhabitants are less prepared to adopt queer politics and seem more inhospitable to festivals that challenge heterosexual norms. Given their lower cultural capital compared to urban counterparts, they are more reluctant to take on emancipatory ideas about sexuality politics. This rural–urban differential has been documented in other countries that have a considerable history of gay and lesbian festivals (Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2008). Similarly, male respondents in our sample are significantly less prone to welcome LGBTQI+ festivals in Sibiu compared to their female counterparts. Gender produces the largest effect of the independent variables in our regression model, as shown in Table 2. This effect could be related to the

Table 2. The results of the logistic regression model: Negative attitudes toward the organization of queer festivals (DV).

	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp (B)
Attendance to existent festivals	-,175	,054	10,624	,001	,839
Diversity of the existent festivals	,258	,094	7,447	,006	1,294
State as a cultural regulator	,140	,078	3,241	,072	1,151
Tourists contribute to a good image of the locality	,285	,120	5,606	,018	1,330
Attitudes toward Roma festivals	-,724	,094	59,851	,000	,485
Self-assessed religiosity	,265	,082	10,297	,001	1,303
Age	,013	,005	7,437	,006	1,013
Gender	,536	,156	11,737	,001	1,708
Rural	,377	,187	4,087	,043	1,458
Education – 3 categories (tertiary education as the reference category)			5,120	,077	
Education level up to lower-secondary	,461	,232	3,946	,047	1,585
Education level up to upper-secondary	-,019	,177	,012	,913	,981
Constant	–2,024	,771	6,897	,009	,132
Cox & Snell <i>R</i> square	,187				
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> square	,250				
Predicted	53,6%				66,4%
No. of cases	922				

Source: ELABCHROM research project; authors' elaboration.

perceived threat posed by LGBTQI+ festivals in a society characterized as hypermasculine. While acknowledging the place-contingency of this concept (Childs, 2016), we can allegedly contend that Romanian men might feel more responsible to preserve this status quo and protect it from any alteration of this prevalent gender-based ideology and normalized heterosexuality. Queer sexuality elicits more anxiety and crises in men living in hypermasculine societies because they may feel under attack more than women in cultures where access to valuable material and symbolic resources is judged based on “manly man” conduct and physical appearances. Finally, compared to tertiary educated respondents, those with an education level up to lower-secondary are more likely to consider LGBTQI+ festivals as wrong, which is explained in the literature through the lower propensity of less-educated people to adopt innovative ideas and behaviors, including in intimate domains of life, such as one’s sexuality (Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2022).

Concluding remarks

Research on examining the link between the degree of cognitive personal engagement and emotional experiences of festival attendees and the legacy of festivals in terms of social and cultural effects such as enduring changes in attitudes of visitors and their post-festival involvement in political, environmental, and cultural aspects of community life provides compelling evidence that sustainability is a function of visitors’ engagement level. The higher their engagement during the festival – expressed as interest in learning and active participation in workshops and debates organized within the festival’s premises – the higher their likelihood to show commitment to cultural and community life post-festival (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2021). However, there is no research on how to build sustainability in semi-peripheral regions, where LGBTQI+ festivals have no tradition as of yet. Against this context, this article contributes to the festival studies and focuses on the social sustainability of LGBTQI+ festivals in medium-sized cities that have not experienced such cultural events up to now. The theoretical foundations for this endeavor are established through the intersection of scholarship dedicated to sustainable development and a corpus of literature focused on festivals and sociocultural events. In this context, the organization of LGBTQI+ festivals can serve as a mechanism to reduce social inequalities and enhance overall well-being within communities. Exposure to diversity poses a challenge to heteronormative models rooted in the past that are poorly aligned with contemporary tourism flows. Romania and Sibiu provide a suitable ground for such research because they allow for the exploration of how structural factors and individual traits combine to explain negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. On the one hand, by structural factors, we refer to a double transition from the socio-cultural heritage from the communist era characterized by strong opposition to LGBTQI+ identities and the promotion of a state-controlled cultural model toward the European Union’s cultural model, which fully acknowledge diversity and the fight against discrimination. On the other hand, the individual traits considered are linked to individuals’ cultural consumption, value orientations, and sociodemographic characteristics.

This article’s results indicate that, among the local population, there is a substantial portion of individuals (46%) characterized by negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals, viewing their organization as detrimental for the community. The factors that contribute to negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals include the following: the perception of

the state as a cultural regulator, satisfaction with the existing diversity regarding the organization of local festivals, agreement with the idea that tourists contribute to a positive image of the locality, higher levels of religiosity, and rural residence. Additionally, negative attitudes are more prevalent among men compared to women and become more frequent among older age groups when controlling for all other predictors. In contrast, factors that decrease the probability of negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals include more frequent participation in other types of festivals, positive attitudes toward festivals organized by the Roma minority, and a higher level of education.

These results could serve as valuable sources of information for policies aimed at developing socially sustainable cultural events. First, to reduce the opposition from specific segments of the local population toward LGBTQI+ festivals, targeted informational activities and public debates should be organized within these groups. Harmonizing relationships with these segments could ensure long-term sustainability and enhance social inclusion within the community. Second, certain educational institutions (e.g. universities) could serve as essential mechanisms for the long-term transformation of the community and the reduction of negative attitudes toward LGBTQI+ festivals. Third, such festivals could serve as exercises that contribute to changing mindsets and foster long-term openness within the population toward all types of minorities, including sexual minorities. These festivals should be viewed as part of a broader range of activities aimed at social inclusion, rather than as something separate or distinct.

The main limitations of this study stem from the exclusive use of survey data for the analysis of public opinion and influencing factors. Although a research design of this kind is highly valuable for identifying statistically significant relationships and providing a general overview of the research topic, the data does not allow for a deep exploration of certain aspects. Future qualitative research would be highly beneficial in uncovering the subjective opinions people express when opposing these festivals and assessing the extent to which such opposition might be rooted in fear of the unknown, structural discrimination, or the instrumentalization of LGBTQI+ issues for other political and economic agendas.

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