This is Us: Co-creating & living a same-sex relationship in Malta.

How do same sex couples co-create & experience their couplehood in Malta?

By

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ABSTRACT

This research study explored the experiences of same-sex couples residing in Malta. By employing Thematic Analysis, five same-sex couples were interviewed and asked to co-construct their stories and delve into the formation of their relationship and their experience of a same-sex relationship in Malta. The focus was on how they co-created their relationship and how they experience being in a same-sex couple within the unique context of Malta. The primary findings indicate that these couples base their relationship formation predominantly on what they learned from their families-of-origin. They forge their own distinctive paths by drawing upon their strengths and resources, striving towards marital satisfaction. Additionally, findings also indicate that same-sex couples experience a degree of minority stress because of their sexuality.

Keywords: same-sex couples, LGBTIQ, relationship formation, minority stress.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

23rd July 2023

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this dissertation entitled 'This is Us: Co-creating & living a same-sex relationship in Malta. How do same sex couples in Malta, co-create & experience their couplehood?' is an original study carried out by myself, and the conclusions drawn herein are a result of my own work, unless otherwise acknowledged by citation.

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my dear friend Grace, whose untimely departure left a void in our lives that can never be filled. This thesis is dedicated to her, honouring her unwavering dedication to her family, her tireless work ethic, and her compassionate heart always willing to lend a helping hand to others. Grace, your presence is deeply missed, and your memory will forever inspire me to pursue my goals with the same passion and kindness that you exemplified.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 My personal and professional curiosity

While I identify as a heterosexual female, I have friends who are part of the LGBTIQ community whom I have known since my teenage years. Growing up, I witnessed the additional struggles my LGBTIQ friends experienced when they explored new relationships, as they came to terms with their sexuality and came out to their families and friends. This was different and significantly more complex than my own experience. It was assumed by my family and society that I was heterosexual and that I would be interested in men – that was the case. Before they could even think of mentioning their romantic interests, my LGBTIQ friends had to go through the emotional turmoil of coming out, always at the risk of being rejected by family and friends. I witnessed this process and the fear of rejection that my friends experienced; it struck me deep and stayed with me until decades later. I felt that this was unfair given that it is already complicated to individuate as a teenager, to grow in self-confidence and to find your place in society. My LGBTIQ friends had to fight so many additional intrapersonal and interpersonal battles just to have the freedom to fall in love.

During the interviewing process, I faced a few challenges in maintaining a neutral stance as a researcher. All the participants interacted with a high degree of openness and shared painful experiences that they had been through – I am deeply grateful for this. I was humbled by the trust the participants showed in me, even though they did not know me. One of the challenges I faced was to process the [to me] simple fact that most of the pain endured by the participants was inherently unnecessary. Some participants were cut off by family, friends or society in

general simply because of their sexual orientation and for being in a same-sex relationship. I, as a member of the society in which they live, feel ashamed that in the year 2023, LGBTIQ couples are still required to justify the nature of their relationship with their significant other and may risk rejection and other forms of discrimination because of it.

1.2 Rationale

My interest in this topic emerged through the local advancements in the LGBTIQ community and Malta's legislation developments in the area. In the last decade, Malta's legislative landscape has undergone significant changes that have redefined the dynamics of romantic partnerships. Notably, the legalization of divorce in 2011, the recognition of same-sex unions in 2014, the enactment of cohabitation law in 2017, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2017 (Piscopo, Vella and Abela, 2020). One also must keep in mind that in Malta, the Church has traditionally set sexual morality. The political sway of the Church is evident in the alignment of social policy and legislation in Malta with the Church's moral values, indicating a high level of congruence between the two (Deguara, 2019).

The challenges LGBTIQ couples encounter, mismatch with the advancements in legislation. Following various LGBTIQ accounts on social media platforms, I observed that whilst legislation put Malta as one of the most advanced countries in legalising LGBTIQ related rights, still, many individuals who are part of the LGBTIQ community experience a degree of discrimination and intolerance towards them. It appears that whilst on a legislative level

LGBTIQ rights in Malta are very advanced, the lived experience of same-sex couples is not as smooth as one would expect.

Upon reflecting and researching the topic of same sex relationships, my curiosity expanded. I decided to research the dynamics and co-creation of same-sex relationships, embedded in the local context. I am interested in understanding the circular relationship between dominant social constructs and what influences gay and lesbian couples in creating and constructing committed romantic relationships. Locally, there is a lacuna in research about the formation of relationships of same-sex couples. I hope this research facilitates in starting to address this gap in local research. The study will be focusing on the circular effect between same sex relationships, family of origin, social constructs, and how the latter points influenced the way the same-sex relationship is created between the two individuals. A systemic exploration will be conducted concerning the connections among the couple's beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and expectations, as well as their relationship dynamics. This will involve giving the couple the opportunity to narrate their story in their preferred manner while carefully observing their interactions, patterns, dialogues, and relational exchanges during the process.

1.3 LGBTIQ's rights & advancements in Malta

In Malta, same-sex couples have been able to formalise their relationship since 2014 when the Civil Unions Act was enacted. In 2017, the Marriage Act was amended to include marriage between same-sex couples. Up until 2014, the relationships of same-sex couples in Malta were devalued by the fact that they did not have the option to legally formalise their relationship. The lack of opportunity to marry was a sign of exclusion from society - therefore marriage equality meant that LGBTIQ families gained the recognition they deserve (Malta Gay Rights

Movement [MGRM], 2012). The sentiment expressed by MGRM contrasts with Diamond's, who poses the question: Will legal marriage be beneficial for same-sex couples, or will it pressure same-sex couples to conform to heteronormative standards? (Diamond, 2016). Most research is aligned with MGRM's position and has shown that, if allowed to, many individuals in the sexual minority would choose to marry their long-term romantic partner (Frost, 2020).

1.4 Research Question

This study aims at enquiring the following research question:

This is Us: Co-creating & living a same-sex relationship in Malta.

How do same sex couples in Malta, co-create & experience their couplehood?

In Malta, family is regarded as one of the cornerstones of society. It lays the foundations for close and personal connections in everyday life. The Maltese rank family as their priority (Abela as cited in Borg, 2019).

The strong family foundation found in Maltese culture provoked my curiosity about the way in which same-sex couples develop their relationships against this societal backdrop. Most same-sex couples (at present in 2023) have been raised by heterosexual couples. In view of this, I am interested in studying how homosexual and lesbian individuals developed their relationships and how they created their beliefs about relationships. Therefore, the research aims to focus on the circular exchange between culturally available narratives, social

constructs, how same-sex couples learned to be in a relationship and on whom they modelled their relationship. Some questions that I am curious about are:

- What do same-sex couples draw from when co-creating their relationships?
- What informs them about couplehood?
- Who has taught them what they want and what they do not want in a relationship?
- How did/do they negotiate the way they live as a couple?

1.5 Layout of the study

The next chapter will present available studies to ground this research, including statistical and systemic literature about relationship formation and LGBTIQ relationships. Chapter 3 will delve into the methodology, explaining the steps of the narrative study and choice of sample while outlining the ethical procedures and data analytical strategies. The results are presented in Chapter 4 - highlighting the main themes that emerged from the data collection and data analysis. Chapter 5 will present an in-depth discussion of the themes and sub themes, followed by suggested clinical and future implications, as well as limitations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Preamble

Societal discourse about romantic relationships and the meaning attributed to them conveys the message to the LGBTIQ community that their relationships are inferior to heterosexual ones (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001). Society is still incredibly heteronormative in its portrayal of couples and families in everyday life. Heterosexuality is most often the only valid form of couple identity and family life (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001). While same-sex couples deal with family issues in the same way as heterosexual families do (Frost, 2020), society treats the former in a way that shows great reluctance in considering them as a family or couple (Vella, 2015).

2.2 Family, Marriage, and Couplehood in Malta

Establishing lasting and gratifying romantic partnerships is one of the key milestones in the process of personal growth during adulthood (Jamison & Lo, 2020).

In Malta, local literature has mostly focused on heterosexual couples and heteronormative views of marriage. In her paper discussing the changes and evolution of Maltese families, Abela (2009) refers to the composition of the family as husband, wife and children. Vella (2015) echoes this by stating that in Malta, the basic building block of a family has always been the belief that marriage is the union of a man and a woman.

One of the attitudes towards same-sex relationships is that it is the state's responsibility to maintain social order and preserve the core social norms of institutions, for these institutions to be successful (Sugrue, 2006). This ideology also applies within the Maltese landscape, where it is to be noted that the state's position towards family and relationships is heavily influenced by the Catholic church. Locally, it is expected, obvious and natural to be Catholic (Day, 2011, as cited in Deguara, 2017).

The introduction of same-sex civil unions and marriage in 2014 and 2017 respectively, has driven numerous social debates about the definition of family (Patterson et al, 2014). Traditionally, marriage [between a man and a woman] has been considered as the prerequisite for having children and establishing a family. Changes in the formation of relationships have had an impact on the transition to parenthood (Abela & Walker, 2014). The aforementioned legislative developments in Malta have fostered an environment that enables people to challenge the ethical prescriptions of the Catholic Church. The view of religious doctrine in Malta started shifting from a rigid blueprint that was unquestionably adhered to, to a system where individuals can selectively apply religious principles based on personal circumstances and disregard when deemed irrelevant (Deguara, 2019). This does not happen without complexity for members of LGBTIQ community, particularly due to Malta's small size and a tightly knit community where in-person communication with extended family members is prevalent and anonymity is a rare occurrence (Piscopo, Vella, & Abela, 2020).

By fully including same-sex couples and families, traditional marriage and families will not lose any of their value. Having a fully inclusive meaning of words such as couple and family shows that human rights have become the new morality (Mck. Norrie, 2005).

2.3 Relationship Formation & the Family Life Cycle

Same-sex relationships remain insufficiently researched, specifically in terms of how they are established, the meanings they hold within the context of relationships and the paths these relationships follow over time (Haas & Whitton, 2015).

Sustaining solid romantic partnerships such as marriage and cohabitation have been associated with improved mental and physical well-being for adults and children. Nevertheless, keeping these relationships intact can present challenges (Kamp Dush et al., 2018). The establishment of close relationships, or the process of becoming a couple and maintaining a shared identity, is a developmental journey; however, many researchers tend to start their investigation of these relationships from the marriage stage.

Although marriage holds significant legal importance to most people in a relationship, intimate connections form prior to the wedding. Consequently, it may be more sensible to consider starting a study at the couple's initial encounter, first date, or the commencement of cohabitation, especially when examining the development of successful relationship building skills in romantic relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002).

Contrastingly, the Family Life Cycle model proposes that individual growth occurs within the emotional framework of relationships, with family relationships being particularly influential (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989). The model also suggests that family development and transformation occur when internal dynamics undergo shifts, such as when a family member comes out as gay or lesbian and enters a same-sex romantic relationship, as explored in this

research. This model becomes essential in the conceptual framework because it highlights how the emergence of challenges or family cohesion often coincides with these life cycle transitions (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989). Marriage symbolizes the union of two individuals from distinct family backgrounds, forming a new family unit together (Morris & Carter, 1999). According to this model, the initial phases of couple formation, often perceived as straightforward and effortless, are, in reality, among the most intricate stages in the family life cycle.

2.4 Systemic Perspective

Due to the systemic nature of this study, it is imperative to consider systemic theories and concepts to gain insights into dyadic processes. Understanding the whole is only possible when we examine the relationships among its individual components since everything is interconnected. This becomes particularly significant in comprehending the interrelated aspects of the formation of same-sex relationships, their dynamics with families of origin, and their integration into the broader societal context.

Bateson's (1972) concept of the system's ecology emphasizes that each member of a family system assigns significance to the actions and communication patterns that develop within that system, resulting in a coherent whole. This framework enables us to understand how the interviewed couple mutually responded to one another, validating both their shared and contrasting perspectives while recounting their personal encounters with romantic love within the heteronormative context of Maltese society. The concept of cultural embeddedness (Dallos & Vetere, 2009) serves as a significant contextual factor in intimate relationships, exerting a notable influence on the cultural discussions concerning the essence of and anticipations related to couple relationships.

Also of relevance is the notion of intergenerational traditions (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980) which play a crucial role in comprehending how the couple constructed their account of romantic love and how it evolved amid their interactions as a same-sex couple within Maltese society. This pertains to the vertical flow within the family system (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989), encompassing the patterns of behavior and functioning that are passed down through generations in the family. This includes family attitudes, taboos, expectations, and unresolved matters with which the couple grew up within their respective families of origin.

It is also important to recognize that my personal emotions, feelings, and experiences to which I relate hold significant importance in shaping what I perceive and may have potentially overlooked during the interviews. This aspect profoundly influences the outcomes of this study (Hedges, 2005) and how my own narrative of romantic love and same-sex relationships, as well as the absence of my personal experience in a same-sex relationship, influenced the direction and path of the interview.

2.5 Family of Origin Template

Crucial decisions regarding romantic relationships typically occur in adulthood, yet the groundwork for healthy relationships is laid during childhood (Jamison & Lo, 2020). Research findings indicate that the intimate relationships of parents serve as models or examples for their children to follow (Sassler et al., 2009). The development of romantic connections is influenced by experiences in the family of origin, including parenting style, parents' romantic background and patterns of interaction within the family (Jamison & Lo, 2020).

Studies indicate that there is an intergenerational connection between parental relationship histories and the family structures they create and how these influence the behaviours of their children when they come to forming their own unions (Valle & Tillman, 2012). When exploring the formation of commitment, individuals consistently emphasized the influence of their family, friends, neighbours and society on their understanding of commitment prior to meeting their spouse. Positive examples served as a benchmark for their relationship and shaped their expectations for a committed partnership (Sibley et al., 2015).

Parents, specifically, serve as the primary role models from whom children acquire knowledge about the dynamics and behaviours within marital relationships. Consequently, when compared to others, children who experience parental divorce , may be influenced differently (Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

Some research suggests that children who are exposed to parental conflict have a higher likelihood of encountering less satisfactory relationships in adulthood. Additionally, they may tend to form families at an earlier age and face a higher probability of experiencing the dissolution of their own unions (Valle & Tillman, 2012).

2.6 Relationship Beliefs & Commitment

Apart from acquiring relationship skills, children also develop their beliefs and attitudes in relation to relationships by observing their parents (Amato & Patterson, 2016). Certain observations which children make about their parents' romantic relationships may manifest during their own adulthood, influencing their fundamental beliefs about relationships, such as

positive or negative perceptions of commitment, as well as shaping their interactions with romantic partners (Jamison & Lo, 2020).

The presence of commitment has been shown to be crucial in initiating and sustaining a long-term relationship (Sibley et al., 2015). In their research, Sibley et al (2015) found that the predominant aspect in the development of commitment was the significance of friendship. Most of the participants emphasized that their relationship was rooted in friendship prior to any romantic involvement. Their relationships are marked by connection, fondness, active listening, being attentive to each other's needs and understanding. They demonstrate keen attentiveness to each other's experiences, make an effort to meet each other's emotional needs, and focus on maintaining a strong emotional bond..

During childhood, people also acquire a significant part of their social skills through interactions with their parents. Positive engagement, such as displays of love and affection between parents and adolescents, is associated with improved problem-solving abilities and stronger feelings of love, connection and trust with romantic partners in adulthood (Jamison & Lo, 2020).

Sibley et al. (2015) hold that a valuable lesson imparted from parents is that a successful marriage requires effort, patience and perseverance. Witnessing these increases the level of commitment required by the couple to navigate the difficult aspects of their relationship. Family and society at large are also instrumental for one to learn that persistence to overcome obstacles is required for a committed relationship to work.

2.7 Beyond Positive Examples

When parents experience fulfilling and enduring relationships, their children are presented with regular opportunities to acquire constructive relationship skills. These skills include effective communication, amicable conflict resolution and displays of emotional support (Amato & Patterson, 2016). Positive examples serve as inspiration for one to make efforts to emulate the same behaviours in one's own romantic relationships. However, findings indicate that negative examples of commitment also provide valuable learning opportunities of what should not be replicated and serve as a guide for what must be overcome to fully commit to a relationship (Sibley et al., 2015). Furthermore, observing negative examples of commitment, enables couples to recognise the positive aspects in their own relationships. This, in turn, empowers couples to make informed decisions about how to conduct themselves within their relationship (Sibley et al., 2015).

2.8 Relationship Formation viewed within the Social Constructionist Framework

The social constructionist view is one of the research paradigms being adopted for this research. Social constructionism shifts the perspective from the individual or family to a relational view within a wider context, moving the focus from the internal [individual or family] to the social domain. This paradigm emphasises that meaning is constructed in cultural conversations and contexts (Sinclair & Monk, 2004).

The cultural discourse and research in Malta regarding relationships and marriage is ideologically dominated by conventional heterosexual parameters, leaving several masked social anomalies that have not been accounted for (Vella Grima, 2017). In Maltese society,

heterosexual couples are regarded as the ideal. As Grima explains in his study, when dating his now husband, he felt they were constantly being ‘compared with the ‘originals’’ (Grima, 2017, p. 16). This thought was repeated by Frost (2020); in transitioning from a structural level to the level of attitudes, it becomes apparent that despite the fact that there is legal equality in certain countries, there is still a lack of complete public support for the equal recognition of same-sex relationships. This serves as evidence that many individuals in most societies perceive same-sex couples as inferior to mixed-sex couples. This disparity is not limited to political or legal domains but also persists on a moral level (Frost, 2020). This had also been remarked by Vella in his earlier research, where he affirmed that same-sex couples have been positioned and are viewed as belonging outside family morality (Vella, 2015).

Society exhibits a feeling of superiority towards heterosexual couples when it claims that granting equal rights to same-sex couples will harm heterosexual couples (Mck. Norrie, 2005). According to the latest survey conducted in 2019 by the European Commission, which examined perceptions of discrimination based on sexual characteristics, sexual orientation, and gender identity, it was revealed that 53% of Europeans believe that discrimination against gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals is prevalent in their country (Shreeves, 2020).

Gay and lesbian couples are accustomed to having to define their intimate relationships in a societal context that does not encourage them to exist in the first place, both as individuals and as couples. Notwithstanding legislation recognising same-sex unions, this antagonistic approach is still present in society at large. Despite this, studies indicate that lesbians demonstrate strong psychological and social functioning and high relational competencies (Anderson & Sussex, 1999). In more recent research, Frost (2020) expressed a similar

sentiment regarding couple-level minority stress, which arises due to the ongoing stigmatisation of same-sex relationships. This indicates that while there have been advancements in the granting of rights to LGBTIQ individuals, the lived experience of same-sex couples are still weighed down by discrimination and added stress.

This study aims at understanding in detail, the experience of same-sex couples in Malta and how they co-constructed their couplehood within the local societal context presented above.

2.9 Through the Narrative Lens

This study is based on a systemic, social constructionist framework. Based on the notions of social constructionism epistemology, it is interesting to investigate the circularity between the family-of-origin scripts and the influence of the same on the manner in which LGBTIQ individuals form their own romantic relationships. A circular interpretation of a situation offers a wider context within which one can understand the evolution of society, families, and individuals (Walter, 2018). This view expands on the circularity of patterns of interaction and dynamics within the family itself and the circularity of the family within the wider Maltese social context. The narrative framework lends itself excellently to eliciting the lived experiences of same-sex couples in the context of their families and consequently in the wider Maltese context. The narrative framework was chosen for this research because it seeks to understand the stories of the couples and how these have been constructed.

My curiosity to learn more about the research question lies, especially, in the Maltese context where most homosexual adult individuals were raised in a heterosexual family environment which itself exists in a heteronormative culture. Maltese culture is deeply embedded in the principles of Catholicism, given that the church in Malta has had a strong influence on morality, laws, and policies for centuries (Deguara, 2019). LGBTIQ individuals struggle to live an authentic identity in a society that does not accept their full social participation. Goffman compares social relations to theatrical performance, holding that maintaining face is a persistent behaviour. Stigma related to sexual identity and orientation is embedded in social relations that views homosexuals as ruining society's normal identity (Bradford & Clark, 2011). Thus, this study seeks to peel off the layers of "maintaining face" as explained by Bradford and Clark (2011), to get a deeper understanding of the actual experience of being in a same-sex relationship in Malta.

The Narrative Framework focuses on learning about the stories of couples, families, and individual family members and how these narratives have been constructed. Family members within the same family have differing views and understanding of the same reality (Suddeath et al, 2017). Each family member's understanding and meaning of reality is shaped within a wider social and cultural context (Hoyt, 1988). Through this study the researcher aims to understand the views of same-sex couples and their understanding of their reality. The aim is to learn more about how LGBTIQ individuals learned about creating and living a romantic relationship from their families and wider society. In society one can see several dominant narratives that define various aspects of that society or culture, such as the interest of this study: society's heteronormative view of couples and families (Dallos & Draper, 2010) and how this shaped the experience of same-sex couples in the journey of creating their couplehood.

The way our view of our reality is shaped can be understood through Piscopo, Vella and Abela's research findings utilising Brofenbrenner's ecosystem framework (Piscopo, Vella & Abela, 2020). The below figure (Figure 1) shows the interplay of various factors that influence Maltese couples on different levels. This study is interested in the link between the meso and the micro level as experienced by same-sex couples, particularly the formative experiences via the family of origin.

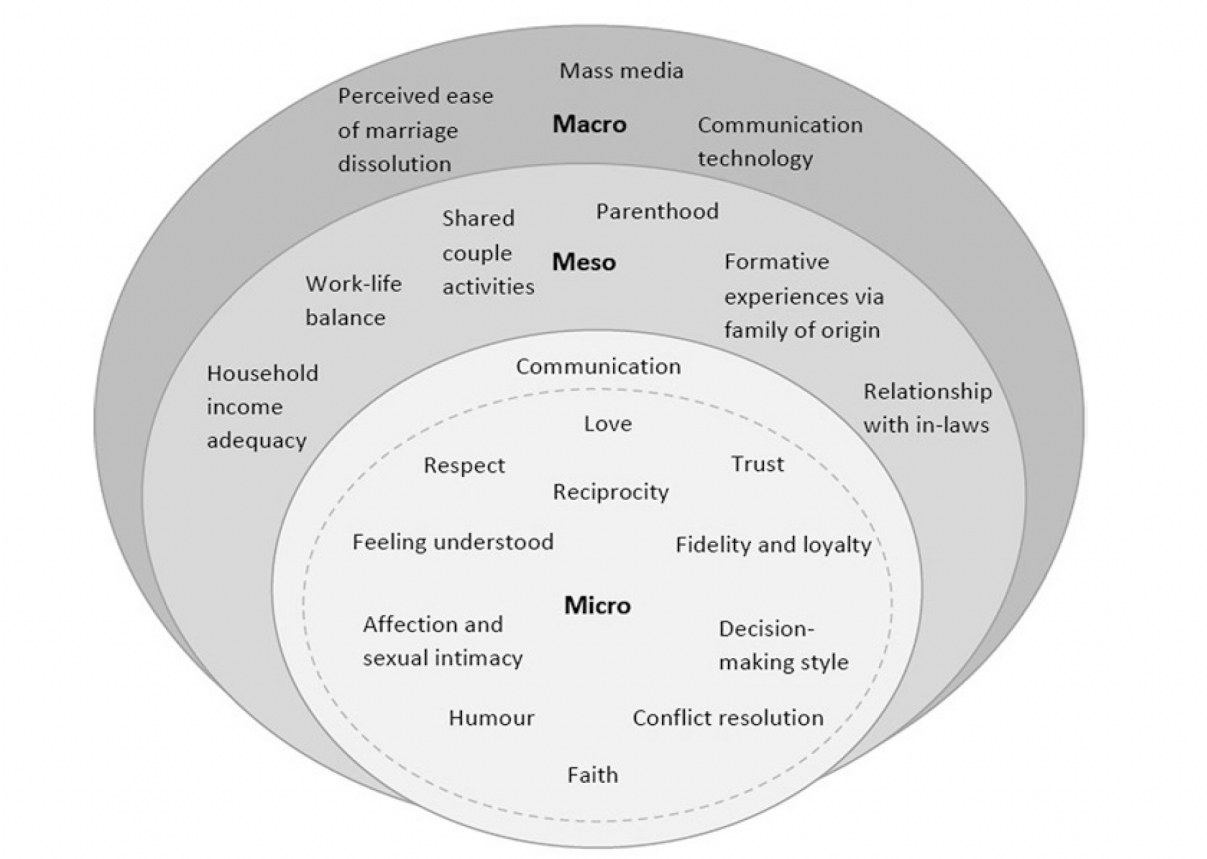


Figure 1 Factors influencing couple relationships in Malta as emerging from the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society sustainable relationships studies (PFWS, 2016, 2017 as cited in Piscopo, Vella & Abela, 2020)

In attempting to understand what shapes people's ways of constructing their relationships, it is useful to widen the context and consider research about parent-child relationships. Empirical research indicates that the parent-child relationship correlates to the quality of adult children's marital relationships (Holman & Birch, 2002) and relationship formation (Jamison & Lo, 2020). Doxey (1994) as cited in Holman & Birch (2002), holds that the marital relationship, while evolving, continues to be affected by the remembered parent-child relationship and what the child learned about relationships through their interactions with their parents (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Adults who as children experienced strong and secure connections with their caregivers, grow into adults who exhibit healthy adaptation and growth and the ability to form strong, lasting relationships (Amato & Patterson, 2016). When two adults join to form an intimate relationship, they both bring, or fail to bring, family-of-origin resources (both ill and good) into the newly formed relationship. The better the quality of these social and personal resources, the better the chances of the subsequent marital quality being on the high side (Lewis & Spanier, 1979 as cited in Holman & Birch, 2002).

2.10 Family Scripts Framework: how family-of-origin scripts influence adult intimate relationships and marriage.

The concept of family scripts is that scripts are basic patterns of interactions, rarely changed, which are repeated like the rerun of scenes in a play. This concept, developed by John Byng-Hall, complements the Social Constructionist and narrative frameworks as it aims to understand the family's own patterns of interaction and their meaning within the family itself.

This framework maintains that scripts provide routines to family life which are for the most part followed automatically. Byng-Hall asserts that the auto-pilot interactions free the family's

energy so that they can focus on new information. To grow, evolve, and adapt to changes, the family needs to establish an interplay between repetition and integrating new information and patterns. When integrating new information and patterns by including improvisation or introducing new habits into the pattern, a family is re-writing its script and thus establishing a new script of the way things are done within that family (Byng-Hall, 1995). The idea of family scripts holds significance when examining how couples combine their individual scripts, influenced by their respective families of origin, into a unified and cohesive narrative (Azzopardi, 2007, p. 34). This concept ties into the purpose of this study in understanding how the family of origin has impacted the ideologies of LGBTIQ individuals about adult romantic relationships. Keeping in mind the Maltese social context, where at present the majority of LGBTIQ individuals were raised by heterosexual families. Thus, through asking questions about family of origin scripts, this research attempts to understand the experience of same-sex couples in integrating new information and patterns within the family system (Byng-Hall, 1995). This ties in to the afore- mentioned factors influencing Maltese couples, where one can zoom in on how the patterns of the family of origin influence couples in the creation of their own relationship as adults - Meso level [refer to Fig. 1].

Generally, human behaviour is based on the meaning created in previous interactions and the meaning attributed to another person's behaviour or situation. Through this, humans develop their sense of self and others. In the context of the correlation between family-of-origin and adult-child relationships, research suggests that the family-of-origin is one of the central influences in the adult-child's perception of relationship intimacy in others (Amato & Patterson, 2016). The family-of-origin also influences the manner in which the child-adult sees and manages the interaction of structures and the meaning derived from such interaction (Holman & Birch, 2002).

When creating a relationship as an adult, whether consciously or not, individuals bring scripts from their family of origin and enact them in the new relationship. The script in this case is a replicative one, whereby the individual is attempting to repeat the past. Some individuals might attempt to do things differently from their family of origin, embarking on a corrective script (Byng-Hall, 1988). Joining the script from both families of origin is a complex process for couples as they both negotiate the new script that they are creating together. This framework is particularly apt for the present research as it investigates how same-sex couples co-create their couplehood.

2.11 LGBTIQ from a Family Scripts Perspective

A resistance to integrating new information within the family generally indicates that the family perceives changes to its beliefs as a threat to its survival. This makes the family script and interaction patterns rigid and non-adaptive to changing contexts (Byng-Hall, 1988). Homosexual individuals coming out to their (heterosexual) family might be perceived as a threat to the family's homeostasis and hence their sexuality and the change to the script that it brings is resisted (Bradford & Clark, 2011). Members of same-sex couples undergo increased stress when compared to others, due to lack of acceptance and being misunderstood by significant individuals, particularly their families (Frost, 2020). Young adults in Malta and other countries, live through a stressful experience when coming out to their parents. In their research, Bradford & Clark (2011) indicated family shame as a common theme in the coming out phase. When coming out to their family some LGBTIQ individuals are faced with emotional abuse and being labelled as flawed. This creates added stress to LGBTIQ couples

[minority stress], which at times pushes individuals to hide their relationship, creating an added mental load (Frost, 2020). Conversely, in families where the LGBTIQ individual was accepted and their identity acknowledged, the adjustment in the family was smooth and positive (Bradford & Clark, 2011).

Growing up, individuals seek to establish relationships with someone who is able to play roles similar to those found in the family-of-origin script (Byng-Hall, 1995). Therefore, LGBTIQ individuals might encounter considerable challenges when re-writing family scripts in their new family or relationship.

2.12 A parenthesis on Minority Stress

Research indicates that romantic connections, and physical and mental health are closely connected. Several studies indicate that individuals in healthy relationships report improved physical and psychological health (Rice et al., 2020). Unlike heterosexual couples, same-sex couples face various challenges when developing romantic relationships. Same-sex romantic partners face the challenge of developing a positive relationship while managing stressors associated with being members of a stigmatised minority group (Mohr & Daly, 2008).

Same-sex couples may experience couple-level minority stressors, either individually or together, due to the stigmatised nature of their relationship. This means that when society devalues or undermines their intimate relationships, individuals may encounter difficulties or hardships. Similarly, as a couple, they may face shared challenges because their relationship is

stigmatised; representing a form of marginalised relationship within society. Research shows that the source of minority stress is the societal disadvantage associated with same-sex partnerships. (Frost et al., 2017). Lack of acceptance from others in their social and family networks, manifesting as the rejection of their relationship, can be seen as a source of minority stress at the couple level. Unjust treatment or discrimination, which can occur in various social settings like families or workplaces, may also be encountered. It is crucial to understand how minority stressors manifest in different social contexts. Failing to consider the complete spectrum of social contexts that influence the experience of minority stress is therefore problematic (Frost et al., 2017).

Research indicates that minority stress in same-sex relationships has a detrimental and constraining impact leading to issues within the relationship. Nevertheless, some couples who adopted alternative strategies to mitigate minority stress reported increased closeness and intimacy. While same-sex couples view minority stressors as predominantly, inherently negative, research shows that some couples recognised how these stressors indirectly strengthened their bond with their partners, fostering deeper intimacy and closeness.

Minority stress generally has a negative impact on same-sex relationships; however, studies also show that people shared narratives from their experiences about initially unfavourable incidents of minority stress that later resulted in favourable outcomes through the reframing of redemption stories. The positive outcomes reported typically indicates increased intimacy with their spouses (Frost, 2014).

Redemption stories can be described as narratives where the protagonist initially goes through a negative emotional state and then transitions towards experiencing happiness, joy, excitement, growth or another positive emotional state (Frost, 2014). It is important to note that

the positive effects of redemption stories extend beyond the individual level, and can lead to improved connections and relationships with others. Furthermore, research has shown that individuals with overarching life narratives that include redemptive elements tend to have higher levels of psychological well-being (Frost, 2014).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Epistemological Stance

This study adopts a social constructionist and systemic position as it seeks to understand the experience of the participants, while taking into consideration the context in which the experience was lived (Maxwell, 2012).

In the constructionist paradigm there is an emphasis on the role of language. The central belief is that language and reality are the individual's own interpretation of reality and representation of the object or experience (King & Horrocks, 2010). This study will be focusing on the experiences of participants when creating their committed romantic relationships, as this is deemed to reflect their truth, their individuality, and their context (Burr, 1995). The responses of the participants are naturally influenced by their personal life experiences, which are deeply rooted in their unique circumstances. As a result, the overall experience is entirely dependent on each individual's perspective. (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1998).

A systemic approach acknowledges the intricate and mutual influence individuals have on each other. This framework recognizes that people interact in complex ways (Mikulincer et al., 2002). Additionally, systems theory, offers insights into how various processes within the couples/wider society system interact with the broader context (Dallos and Draper, 2010). This perspective encourages a comprehensive understanding of relationships on multiple levels, including relational, functional, therapeutic, cultural, and societal aspects.

Thematic Analysis is an appropriate tool for constructing a critical analysis that reveals the fundamental concepts and ideas that form the basis of the explicit data content. Furthermore, it can help to identify the underlying assumptions and meanings embedded within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This aligns with the characteristics of social constructionism in viewing people from a social process and interaction lens (Schwandt, 2001). Eisenberg holds that understanding individuals and their experiences must not be analysed in isolation but should be explored as part of a whole, namely their cultural and social milieu (Eisenberg, 1996; Whitty, 1997).

3.2 Research Approach

Qualitative and quantitative methods of research have different functions; choosing the best option depends on what the research question seeks to address. A qualitative method is best suited for this study due to its focus on specific situations or people and the emphasis it poses on language as opposed to the quantitative emphasis on numbers. The study is aimed at understanding how same-sex couples construct their couplehood within their committed romantic relationships. Qualitative research methods offer a valuable resource of comprehensive and in-depth portrayals and interpretations of various processes within specific and identifiable local settings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Hence, qualitative research will encompass the identification of patterns, relationships, and processes, emphasising their significance within the context of the Maltese Islands.

This study will attempt to gather qualitative information from same-sex couples. Qualitative research methods aim to attain a profound comprehension of a specific phenomenon by analysing the viewpoint of individuals who directly encounter and engage with it (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The significance of adopting this approach in empirical research lies in its ability to yield a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the significance that individuals attribute to their actions, events, and relationships (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The core objective of qualitative research and of this study is to enhance the understanding of a phenomenon by embracing the perspectives of individuals who have directly encountered it. This approach acknowledges the significance of participants' distinct viewpoints that can only be fully grasped within the framework of their unique experiences and worldview (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

3.3 Why Thematic Analysis?

The concept of Thematic Analysis (TA) as a distinct qualitative research approach was initially formulated by Gerald Holton, a physicist and historian of science, in the 1970s. However, it is only in recent times that TA has gained recognition as a unique method with well-defined procedures specifically tailored for application in the social sciences (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Thematic Analysis stands out among other qualitative analytic methods due to its exclusive focus on data analysis, without prescribing specific approaches for data collection, theoretical perspectives, or epistemological and ontological frameworks. It truly serves as a versatile "method" in its own right. The flexibility of TA is one of its key strengths and what makes it

the best suited option for this study. Its versatility enables its application to address a wide range of research inquiries and analyse various types of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

One of the aspects of Thematic Analysis that made it the method of choice for this study is its predominant use among researchers in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy, primarily to investigate the perspectives and experiences of groups of clients and therapists. Typically, these studies rely on interview data (as does this research) to gain insights into the subject matter (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

When using TA, in-depth analysis often progresses beyond mere descriptive summaries and delves into interpretation, weaving a narrative that explores the underlying significance of the data. Thematic Analysis can be employed within "critical" qualitative approaches that draw on poststructuralist, social constructionist, and discursive theories. These approaches are not limited to being solely descriptive but rather aim to critically examine and deconstruct the data (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Another aspect that makes TA the most suited option for this study is its ability to be used from a critical perspective to examine patterns within individual or societal interpretations of a subject and to raise questions regarding the consequences that arise therefrom (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Recruitment

A call for applications was issued on social media channels. Contact was made with LGBTIQ organisations such as MGRM and Allied Rainbow Communities inviting them to advertise the

call for applications among their members who freely applied to participate in the research. An information sheet was disseminated and participants were provided with a description of the study, its aims and procedures. Assurances of confidentiality, anonymity and ethical behaviour were provided in the confidentiality forms. Before the interview, everything was explained to each couple once again, such as assurance of anonymity, data protection procedures, and the use of the information being collected.

3.4.2 Participants

The aim was to select relevant participants to obtain insight into shared experiences as a same-sex couple in Malta. Based on similar studies using TA, this study aimed to interview five same-sex couples who met the below criteria:

1. Couples who are part of the LGBTIQ community and have lived in Malta for most of their life.
2. Couples in a same-sex relationship who identify as being in a committed relationship.

The duration of a couple's relationship does not necessarily signify increased commitment. Therefore, it was sufficient for the purposes of this research that the couples had decided and agreed that they are in a committed relationship. As part of the onboarding process, before carrying out the interview, the applicants were asked how they would describe their status vis-à-vis the relationship; all chosen participants replied that they consider themselves to be in a committed relationship.

Couples **F: Female couple** **M: Male couple**	**Names***	**Age**	**Length of relationship**	**Married**	**Length of marriage**	**Children**	**Living Arrangements**
Couple 1 (F)	Anna Maria	33 26	5 years	Y	1 Year	Fostering short term	Living together
Couple 2 (F)	Fiona Rita	36 34	4 years	Y	3 weeks	No	Living together
Couple 3 (M)	Karl Richard	38 51	8 years	Y	6.5 years	2	Living together
Couple 4 (F)	Lara Elisa	40 46	18 years	Y	8 years	2	Living together
Couple 5 (F)	Charlotte Maya	24 26	2 years & 7 months	N	N/A	No	Living separately with respective family of origin

*Pseudonyms

Table 1: Participants' Profile

3.4.3 Sampling

Consistent with TA studies, the researcher must ensure that samples are purposive and homogenous. This ensures that the research question is meaningful in a homogenous way to the group of participants (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Purposive sampling was used based on whether participants met the above-mentioned criteria. The interview was piloted with one couple and used as a trial to determine the suitability of the questions for the purpose of the study (King & Horrocks, 2010).

3.4 Data Collection

After the pilot interview, appointments were set with the rest of the participants. They were free to choose where the interview would be held. Two interviews were held at the participants'

home, two interviews were held at the researcher's office, and one interview was conducted online.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with the conversation aimed at the narrative of the couple's families of origin and their own as a same-sex couple (Smith et al., 2009). Questions about the couples' experience in creating their relationship were asked with the aim of highlighting the couples' understanding of the research question (Smith et al., 2009). An interview schedule (Appendix 1) was used as a guide for the interviews, ensuring that the questions allow enough space for the participants to talk freely about the experiences they consider most appropriate. Flexibility in navigating the interview questions is highly beneficial for the purpose of the study as participants are seen as co-researchers and their judgement in the way the interview is handled has great value and bearing(Smith & Eatough, 2008).

3.5 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using Thematic Analysis to understand the participants' subjective meaning of the phenomenon being studied. Themes were elicited; and the data was then analysed using TA methodology (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

The transcripts were read several times to allow the possibility of engaging with the content and obtaining a deeper understanding of the issues being addressed. This increases the researcher's receptiveness to the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analysis of the data in

qualitative studies is generally carried out in five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This approach is what informed the researcher as she proceeded with the analysis of the data.

Codes were generated from the data collected, the former being the smallest units of analysis that help the researcher capture interesting features of the data which is relevant to the research question. The codes were used as building blocks to generate themes. Themes bring together a group of codes into one group that is underpinned by a central core idea. The themes serve as a framework for organising the data collected which facilitates the researcher's analysis and observation of patterns and nuanced messages (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The researcher read the codes and the respective quotes from participants several times, following which she grouped codes into themes. Several reviews of the themes and codes grouped within them took place until a final set of themes and sub themes was extracted (Refer to Fig. 2 below).

Themes	**Sub Themes**
1. Learning through observing the Family of Origin	1.1 Aspiring to do differently, before meeting their partners. 1.2 Learning together, integrating two diverse family experiences into one.
2. Negotiation of beliefs about romantic relationships	2.1 Communication 2.2 Monogamy 2.3 Finances
3. The road to marriage.	3.1 Factors influencing decision to get married.

4. The tensions of Living a Same Sex Relationship in Malta	4.1 People's Reactions: situating oneself in public as a same-sex couple 4.2 A convoluted relationship with religion and religious practice. 4.3 Assumptions made by heterosexuals 4.4 Minority Stress

Table 2. Themes extracted from data collected.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

I requested and was granted ethical approval for this study by the Institute of Family Therapy, Malta. As part of the onboarding process, written and verbal explanations were provided to the participants. The information relayed to them was the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection and analysis, how their anonymity and confidentiality would be safeguarded and ensured and how data protection measures would be implemented. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. Identifiable data was omitted and fictitious names were used when reporting and discussing the findings. Consent forms were provided, read, and explained to all participants before interviews commenced. Interview recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after completion of this research study. Participants were also informed that therapy would be offered if they felt the need or if they felt distressed during the interview.

3.7 Self-Reflexivity

A central part of qualitative research is the researcher's reflexivity about what she/he adds to the interview and the research process. Throughout the research process I reflected on my position within this process as a heterosexual woman, a mother, 44 years old, and married to a man. Throughout the interviewing process, I reflected on my own journey of forming relationships in both my marriage and in previous relationships. I observed how the way I co-constructed my couplehood with my husband is different from the journey I pursued with my first husband (which marriage ended in an annulment). Sub themes of communication, trust and respect and choosing what to replicate from family of origin scripts were very familiar to me and some of the information shared by participants mirrored my husband's and my choices. Throughout this process, I was conscious of the need to maintain my curiosity and to continue questioning to avoid the risk of not asking the right questions and missing out on valuable information about the participants' experiences.

Being a heterosexual woman, my interest in this research was mainly driven by the experiences that friends (who are part of the LGBTIQ community) shared with me along the years. I was a teenager in the mid to late 1990s; at the time, I clearly recall experiences of close friends who identified as gay and lesbian as they navigated their own sexuality, contending with family, societal and religious expectations. I found myself empathising with them as, from my experience, it was already hard being a heterosexual teenager ; identifying as part of the LGBTIQ community clearly made the experience even more complex and painful.

Not identifying within the LGBTIQ community myself, it was easier for me to maintain my curiosity as a researcher. On the other hand, being heterosexual there may have been instances where I did not understand certain things or I was not aware of questions that I should have

asked. In order to mitigate this, towards the end of the interview, I asked the participants whether they felt there was anything further that I should know as a heterosexual researcher. As part of my reflexive journey, I attempted to disregard my perception of my friends' experiences from decades ago. These have formed my own beliefs and opinions about how it must feel to be in a same-sex relationship within a heteronormative society. While as a researcher I did have a hypothesis to my research questions, I was very careful not to let my hypothesis get in the way of asking open ended questions to the couples I interviewed.

The interviews were carried out with same-sex couples who have lived in Malta for most of their life. As I am Maltese and have lived in Malta all my life I have a shared cultural background with the participants. This helped me to make them feel comfortable enough to share their stories and to feel understood from my end. It might however have also limited my curiosity and questioning and kept me from probing further into aspects which were culturally familiar to me.

One of the main difficulties I encountered was how to effectively manage the extensive amount of detailed information elicited from the interviews without losing focus. To mitigate this, I had a clear rationale to support my research questions. This approach assisted me to initiate a partnership dynamic with the participants, creating an increased openness in our interaction and thus encouraging a collaborative approach. Additionally, it allowed for ample interpretative opportunities, exhibited high accessibility, flexibility and applicability, albeit demanding careful balancing to ensure thoroughness.

CHAPTER 4: MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will present the main findings that emerged from the research. The chapter will start with the profile of the participants, followed by a presentation of the Themes and Sub-Themes which emerged from the interviews with the five couples who participated in the data collection.

4.2 Participants' Profile

All the couples who participated in the research consider themselves to be in a committed relationship. A committed relationship is characterised by individuals who make a conscious decision to prioritise their emotional, romantic and sexual connection with each other; they share a strong sense of dedication, loyalty, and fidelity and both partners are committed to building a long-term and sustainable relationship together. Four of the couples are married, while one couple is dating, with each partner living with their respective family of origin. The latter is the only couple that does not live together. It is important to note that they are young and it is typical for Maltese people their age to still be living with their parents. The following table explains their profile and demographic details:

Couples **F: Female couple** **M: Male couple**	**Names***	**Age**	**Length of relationship**	**Married**	**Length of marriage**	**Children**	**Living Arrangements**
Couple 1 (F)	Anna Maria	33 26	5 years	Y	1 Year	Fostering short term	Living together
Couple 2 (F)	Fiona Rita	36 34	4 years	Y	3 weeks	No	Living together
Couple 3 (M)	Karl Richard	38 51	8 years	Y	6.5 years	2	Living together
Couple 4 (F)	Lara Elisa	40 46	18 years	Y	8 years	2	Living together
Couple 5 (F)	Charlotte Maya	24 26	2 years & 7 months	N	N/A	No	Living separately with respective family of origin

*Pseudonyms

Table 3: Participants' Profile

4.3 Table of Themes

Four Themes emerged from the Thematic analysis of the data collected. The themes were predominantly shared by all the couples. Each theme includes a few sub-themes which relate to the main theme. These are presented in the table below:

Themes	Sub Themes
1. Learning through observing the Family of Origin	1.1 Aspiring to do differently, before meeting their partners. 1.2 Learning together, integrating two diverse family experiences into one.
2. Negotiation of beliefs about romantic relationships	2.1 Communication 2.2 Monogamy 2.3 Finances
3. The road to marriage.	3.1 Factors influencing decision to get married.
4. The tensions of Living a Same Sex Relationship in Malta	4.1 People's Reactions: situating oneself in public as a same-sex couple 4.2 A convoluted relationship with religion and religious practice. 4.3 Assumptions made by heterosexuals 4.4 Minority Stress

Table 4: Table of Themes

While the themes presented in the table above may appear distinct, they are interconnected in numerous ways. This interconnectedness becomes evident when analysing the narratives of the participants. Therefore, it is crucial to consider each theme in the context of the participants' overall accounts and as the essence of the participants' experience (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). To provide a deeper understanding of my interpretations, I have included selected quotes from the transcripts as evidence of the thematic analysis methodology that shaped my evaluation.

4.4 Themes

4.4.1 Theme 1: Learning through observing the Family of Origin

When asked what they learned about relationships when they were young, participants shared what they learned from their families of origin. They elaborated about what they decided to do differently from their families and what they chose to replicate. This theme was a dominant one in all the interviews.

4.4.1.1 Sub theme 1: Aspiring to do differently, before meeting their partners.

A common aspect in all interviews was that participants came to their own individual conclusions as to those aspects of their parents' or older relatives' relationships that they did not want to replicate in their own intimate relationships. Some of these ideas were formed before they coupled up with their current spouse/partner. As the excerpts below indicate, participants observed the beliefs and the dynamics of their elders' interactions and used that information to form their own ideas about the way in which they wanted to live their relationships. Maria speaks from the perspective of a daughter and wife about how she and her wife manage their finances.

> Maria: *My mother always depended on my father, and he's quite nasty with his words. He used to comment all the time 'why did you spend so much'……so I didn't want these conflicts in our relationship.*

Elisa articulates how her parents seemingly never argued. Later in the interview she elaborates how difficult it was for her to navigate conflict in her marriage with Lara because she was never exposed to conflict as a normal part of a relationship. Conflict scared her as she feared that when a couple argues they will inevitably break up.

> Elisa*: I came from a background where I never heard my parents argue, never, which now I realise means li they probably did it behind closed doors or they never spoke to each other, which wasn't the case.*

When asked what she learned about relationships when she was younger, from the people close to her, Maria said that based on her parents' relationship she feared being in a relationship because she did not like the way they lived their marriage.

> Maria: *I was sure I didn't want to be like my parents. In fact I used to be scared of relationships as I used to see it as so much hard work and you don't get anything good in return.*

4.4.1.1.2 : Learning together: integrating two diverse family experiences into one.

Nearly all participants mentioned episodes where they realised that their respective families of origin had ways of doing things that were completely different to their spouse's/partner's way. They shared how initially it was difficult to reconcile their different backgrounds and understanding of how a relationship should be lived. Eventually, they came to an agreement and formed their own ideas on how they want to live their relationship.

> Elisa: *I come from a family where we pretend everything is Ok all the time. So, it was difficult. For me, an argument was a tragedy initially.*
>
> Lara: *My upbringing is the total opposite. We discuss everything.*

Rita & Fiona: *Our families are so different*

Rita: *So, someone like Friona, when she stays quiet, makes you go crazy.*

Fiona*: For my family, no news good news, and they speak ten times a day, you know what I mean. Those kind of different families.*

Lara: *But even the bottom line was, when you're younger, whatever happened in your home with your parents, you accept as being the way things should be. Suddenly, when you create your own home, you realise that perhaps it wasn't ideal for you and you know....and you create your ideal one then…*

Participants also mentioned aspects of their parents' relationships that they viewed as a positive. When forming their own committed relationship, they intentionally decided to bring these aspects into their relationship.

When asked what she learned from her parents' marriage, Rita shares how her mother did not give up on her marriage at a particularly challenging time, and although Rita thought that her mother was wasting her time, in hindsight she realises that her mother was being guided by her values about relationships and she learned through this.

Rita: *Ups and downs. There was a time where there were certain bad habits and a particular vice, but they went through it together....my mother did nont give up in that situation. Even because of us. So that's sort of the most thing....that at the time I didn't understand and view the same as my mother. I thought she was wasting her time. But now, I realise how much value there was in the relationship between my parents.*

Anna and Maria explain how they reconciled their diverse upbringing and replicated parts of it. They feel that this helped them to handle finances as a married couple:

> Maria: *Certain things I used to see my parents and their bickering about finances. So I'm like, me and Anna both work. It doesn't mean we're always giving 50/50 each as at times one can give 10 and the other one can give 9. But I wanted it to be fair, we both work hard for the money. I believe it's not just money. To get that money you work, spend a lot of time at work and you can never get back that time.*

> Anna: *Thanfully, they taught us as well, that it's important to save a certain percent, that you invest, do a little business, work and you have your salary…….and it's important to have fun.*

4.4.2 Theme 2: Exploration of beliefs about romantic relationships.

At different points of the interview, participants elaborated on which beliefs about relationships they chose to embrace as a couple. These support them in the way they navigate different aspects of their relationship/marriage.

4.4.2.1 Communication

Whether directly or indirectly, all the couples mentioned communication as being one of the main values and beliefs that their marriage/relationship is based upon.

Charlotte*: I know it's cliche, but communication is key. We believe in that.*

Maria opens up about how she wants Anna, her spouse, to be open with her when she is offended by anything that Maria says or does. She feels that her wife's ability to openly communicate about such issues is important to the success of their marriage.

Maria*: Open communication. I wanted someone to be honest with me, so if I'm bothering you, or speaking to you in a certain way, if I'm shouting, if I'm offending you in some way, tell me. I wanted an open communication relationship.*

Anna*: We agreed to be loyal to each other and to discuss whatever.*

Fiona discussed how she and her wife value the importance of making time for each other to facilitate communication. Fiona and her wife emphasised that they notice a difference between them and other couples where communication is not given priority in the relationship.

Fiona: *We used to seek time together. We used to have long conversations. I think that's where the attraction started too. I think that's the thing we want to maintain the most. I see a lot of difference between us and other couples, irrelevant if they are straight or…..I feel that there isn't that communication going on between them.*

Elisa realised that her upbringing did not mould her in a way that enabled her to discuss her feelings, as she was led to feel that it could come across as confrontational. However, together with her wife Lara, she understood that learning to speak up and communicate her feelings was

a skill that was vital to the success of their relationship. She says that she was helped by the fact that Lara also learned how to observe her more carefully and would realise if she was troubled by something that she was not verbalising. This facilitated their communication and supports Elisa to externalise her feelings.

> Elisa: *probably what I learnt didn't really help me with Lara in that avoiding confrontation for a relationship to work wasn't something that would have helped her. So I had to make a very conscious effort to externalise if I have an issue, as I still find it difficult. But at least now she realises I'm keeping something in.*

4.4.2.2 Monogamy

Karl and Richard decided to have a monogamous relationship because they believe that this fosters trust and stability, aspects that, in their opinion, are the cornerstone of a healthy marriage and family.

Karl had been in an open relationship previously. Through this experience he realised that an open relationship does not align with his beliefs, and he wanted his next relationship to be a monogamous one.

> *Karl: Once, a long time ago, I had another relationship, and it was an open relationship. And it did not last because we got to know certain things. I got to know certain things about him and that was it. The relationship started deteriorating and that's where I learned that open relationships don't exist. They are not good.*

Richard echoes Karl's opinion and says that while open relationships seem to be more widespread in the gay community than with heterosexual couples, he feels that this is not conducive to a healthy family environment. He and Karl agree that monogamy favours stability and a healthy environment within which to raise their children. This indicates that values are also acquired through past experiences and not only through the family-of-origin. In this case Karl and Richard decided to embrace monogamy as one of the foundations on which their relationship is built.

4.4.2.3 Finances

As their relationships developed, the participants felt it was important to discuss finances. All the couples participating in this study chose to openly discuss how they would manage their finances and which of them would take responsibility for this task.

Fiona mentions how she and her wife share finances and combine their incomes. While other couples might handle finances differently, all the couples in this study opted to have shared finances.

> Fiona: *Financially, between us, as in I'm not saying anything special, we share everything. There is nothing mine or hers.*

Maria made a point about the importance of an agreed balance between her and her wife. A balance in the way they both contribute towards their shared expenses and savings. She shared that both she and her wife feel it is fair that everything is shared in a balanced manner because

neither of them wants to be burdened with added responsibility for their partner. They mentioned that during hard times they both stepped in for each other. Out of a sense of fairness they both do more when the other is struggling with their income and they have each other's backs financially.

> Maria: *money is important for both of us…… nobody is gonna be the sugar ma…cause I say sugar mamma…. nobody is in a relationship and I can tell you, here take 200 euro…..and we both started talking about how important money is, how important work is and how important it is to be careful with money, and to have fun, that's very important….*

Richard is the one responsible for finances in his marriage to Karl. He feels comfortable taking this role in the marriage as he tends to worry about money and overseeing the family's finances gives him the reassurance that they can pay their expenses.

> Richard: *I worry a lot that God forbid we end up without money, or whatever. Why? Because I have been through that in my life. Now I brought it into the relationship that I need to know all the expenses of the month, what's coming…….those that I call key expenses…..home loans, cable, internet…everything….insurances…*

4.4.3 Theme 3: The road to marriage

Throughout the interviews, the married couples retraced their journey towards marriage. The main subthemes that emerged and were woven through most or all the interviews are summarised below.

Sub theme 1: Factors influencing the decision to get married

4.4.3.1 Age difference

One couple mentioned that their age difference was a factor that they contended with on their journey to marriage. Anna is a few years older and while she wanted to marry Maria and was ready for the commitment, she did not want to pressure Maria into marriage unless she felt ready too. Therefore, Anna took a step back and let Maria propose when she felt ready, to ensure that their level of commitment towards marriage was aligned.

> Anna: *Since there is an age difference, I never did the first move because I know I'm older and maybe I want certain things. So I said to myself, if I want to be with her, she has to do things at her pace.*
>
> Maria*: Exactly....I proposed, and I really wanted to propose.*

4.4.3.2 Homophobia

While all married couples said that they felt that the other person was 'the one' and they wished

to get married for love, some of the married couples who participated in this study were driven to get married faster for fear of not being recognised as each other's loved one in formal, serious or life-threatening situations. Most of the married couples' narrative echoed the same fear of homophobic situations. This fear fuelled the need to legally consolidate their relationship for fear of being excluded from their loved one's situation because of their sexual orientation.

Maria and Anna commented about the fact that in a medical emergency, the other person in the couple would have no say nor be involved in any decision to be taken regarding their loved one's health. Marriage would formalise the nature of their relationship and give them the reassurance that in case of emergency, they would be allowed to support each other and be recognised by the authorities as each other's next of kin.

> Maria*: We needed to get married to be recogniced that, listen, if I need a decision taken whether I live or die, she knows me, nowadays 24/7.*

Fiona and Rita had a similar approach and journey towards marriage.

> Rita: *Covid hit and that was our deciding fact that like No! We have to get things legalised*
>
> Fiona: *The marriage discussion started from Covid as when we were seeing the cases spiking, hospital cases, we had nothing in writing between us…..*
>
> Rita: *It was a fear... It was a fear....*
>
> Fiona: *That instilled a lot of fear of, I don't know…*
>
> Rita: *If she ends up in hospital, I won't be allowed to go in.*

Participants explained how in similar situations, heterosexual couples would face a less complicated situation. Within a heteronormative society, even though a heterosexual couple is

not married, in an emergency, their status as partners is widely accepted and they would be allowed to be by their loved one's side. Participants narrated how in the case of a same-sex couple, the response to these situations is highly subjective. There is a risk that the person attending to the emergency is homophobic and thus will claim that technically they are not married and refuse to let the partner in; while if it were a straight couple they would have acted differently. There could be instances where the family does not accept the partner because of their sexual orientation and could for example, refuse the partner entry into a hospital. Most couples considered these situations and once they had decided that they wanted to spend their life together, did not want to run such a risk. They opted to get married sooner rather than later as this provided them with peace of mind that they would be recognised as a couple in any situation. As discussed earlier in this paper, individuals in same-sex relationships experience added layers of complexity that heterosexuals are not even aware of due to the privilege they enjoy of being heterosexuals in a heteronormative society.

4.4.3.3 Adoption Process

The prospect of becoming parents through adoption and the process involved was another reason that carried some weight for those the couples that got married. The couples who had intended to become parents through adoption, considered the timing of the marriage, taking into account the length of the adoption process. Once they had decided that they wanted to be together for the rest of their lives, they did not want to waste precious time during which they could have otherwise started the adoption process.

> Fiona: *Even this thing about kids and getting married, at first we were thinking of getting married in 2024. Then we were looking at the issue of adoption, and the requirements*

state that you cannot start the process before you are married. Otherwise, you need to apply as a single parent. We did not wish that.

4.4.4 Theme 4: Living a same-sex relationship in Malta

4.4.4.1 People's Reactions: situating oneself in public as a same-sex couple

At various points during the interview, participants shared society's frequent and less frequent reactions towards their relationship.

Public displays of affection: Maria and Anna explained how they are very vigilant and conscious of their surroundings when showing affection towards each other in public.

Maria: *Anna came to hug me from the back and I told her ej, ej, ej! Here they'll burn us at the stake. It's a joke, but you'd really be conscious of your surroundings.*

Anna: We would be on the alert.

Karl and Richard share the same experience when they show affection in public, and they are out with their own children.

Karl: *there's still a taboo….example if we kiss each other in front of the children.*

Justifying and explaining their relationship to strangers: Participants feel that heterosexual couples do not get asked to explain the nature of their relationship, while they are asked to do

so in many scenarios. Simply having workers at home can give rise to an awkward situation for same-sex couples, as it is not uncommon for workers to ask directly about the nature of their relationship. The participants shared that they feel this is a violation of their privacy and is generally not something heterosexual couples experience. A man and a woman together at home are assumed to be in a romantic relationship, while two women or two men are quizzed about it.

> Anna*: Depends on how much you feel like talking….you'll have workers at home for example. Is she your sister? Yes, my sister….I don't need to stay justifying*

While legislation regarding LGBTIQ rights in Malta has advanced, some couples shared that they feel things are completely different in their day-to-day life.. They still experience stigma, discrimination, harassment, lack of acceptance, ridicule and shame. They feel that the same authorities that gave them rights do not do anything to try to protect them. Although this is not the focus of this research, participants highlighted it as an underlying, dominant theme in same-sex relationships and it therefore cannot be ignored.

> Maria: *On paper we're 2030. In real life, we're like 1990s, 1980s.*
>
> Karl: *You don't always feel comfortable saying he's my husband.*
>
> Richard: *And they asked, Who is getting married? We said we are….they started laughing and laughing.*
>
> Richard*: So we had guests invited to our wedding, some of whom together with their family. There was one person, who came up to us and said, listen, I'm not coming to the*

wedding because I don't want to shock the children, I don't want my children to see two men kissing.

Some of the participants have experienced direct opposition to their relationship, others have been shamed and judged for having children. The experiences narrated by the participants indicate an environment in which people still feel entitled to judge them and formally oppose same-sex relationships and marriage.

In her and Lara's interview, Elisa talked about a protest at their wedding and how she was cut off by a close family member for being in a same-sex relationship.

Elisa: *We ended up with the security having to intervene, cause there was this guy from a particular organisation……Even they got us on the paper without our consent and this nonsense.*

Elisa: Some people feel that they can sit on their high horse and judge. I have a relative who doesn't speak to us because of our relationship, we were very close but she just cut me off….still hurts.

Fetishization: Charlotte and Maya have encountered situations where people sexualise and fetishise their relationship. They explain that they are invited to join threesomes simply because they are lesbians in a same-sex relationship and not because they have expressed any interest to partake in 3-way sex. They feel that this devalues their relationship as their union is viewed merely as a sexual fantasy and is not regarded as the full, committed relationship that it is.

Charlotte: *In our case, cause we're women, more than gay men, to a certain extent, fetishization.*

Maya: *Cat calling... Lots of cat calling....*

Charlotte*: But they for example, cause they say bi…Eh sooo ok 50/50! So, you can join us for a three way? Like…you know….*

4.4.4.2 A convoluted relationship with religion and religious practice

Religion is a theme that was brought up by all the participants during the interviews. While all participants shared a degree of pain suffered as a result of religious influence in Malta, one couple shared stories of inclusion and acceptance by their religious community.

Rita and Fiona share that their experience with religion has been a positive one. They were both actively involved in a religious community, which is where they met. They were able to remain active within the same religious community when they came out as lesbians and formalised their relationship together.

They explain that before starting their relationship they had not come out as lesbians yet. They dealt with their individual sexual exploration, coming out and deciding to start their relationship – all in parallel. They both enjoyed being part of the religious community, therefore they wanted to go through these parallel processes to live authentically with themselves and within the religious community. They describe how people sometimes ask them why they want to continue following a religion that does not openly accept their relationship.

Rita: *Religion is something very important to us and we know the church's position. Thank God today the church is opening up a lot, lot more. Maybe we met people who opened up a lot of roads for us, some people from the church, from the community, we're in a very good relationship with them.*

Fiona: *We also found people to guide us up till the marriage, from a spiritual standpoint.*

Fiona*: We attend the community once a week and when there are activities, we go do our bit. We get challenged a lot on how we keep going when the church in general doesn't openly accept our relationship.*

Conversely, Anna and Maria do not have a clear position vis-à-vis religion and the approach they will take once children are involved when they decide to build their family.

Anna*: When we have kids. What will happen, will we baptise them or not?*

They also shared their pain about an incident involving a priest who publicly judged and condemned people who identify with the LGBTIQ community. They discussed how the state allows such things to happen without proper repercussions, thus not protecting their rights as citizens who have the freedom to live their love life as they wish.

Anna*: He said those things….that it's better to be possessed, and this was said by a priest and he wasn't charged with anything.*

> Maria: *As a society…..as Malta, as a government, as a court….you cannot say that conversion therapy is not allowed…but then, hate speech and other instances like when the priest said those things, not cause he's a priest, he happened to be a priest.*

Karl and Richard state they continuously face situations where their relationship is judged from a religious standpoint. They have faced opposition and judgement both as a couple and as same-sex parents, with people implying that their children are being 'harmed' because they are being raised by two men.

> Richard: *You are living in sin. Even adopting is a sin because children need to be raised by a man and a women, the mother and the father, they keep mentioning that. These are challenges that we face and we got so used to them that we just shut up…..*

Elisa and Lara are still going through a particular situation involving legalities and the Church with regard to the birth of their elder child. When he was born, they had entered into a civil union, but marriage was not yet legal for same-sex couples. Since the child was born before they got 'married', Elisa could not be listed as his parent. It was only Lara who could be listed (as the person who gave birth to him). Their second child was born when they were married so his birth certificate recognises both as his parents. Rectifying the issue for their elder child is an ongoing uphill struggle.

> Elisa: *My issue now is, primarily, two kids, same family, same marriage, one is adopted, one isn't. So we're trying to reverse our eldest child's adoption. Why? Because when we had the marriage they said that the moment you convert to marriage it is assumed, that*

you got married on the day of your civil union. So technically, when the child was born, we were married.

So it became a whole who ha! So now we're going to, since the child is now nearing holy communion, we're going to present to the Curia the adoption certificate, so they remove the Father Unknown.

Elisa*: But again....the parish priest, they look at you in a certain way ....when it comes to the church, if you find an older priest, you're made to feel like you're an alien. With the younger priests, it's not the case I must admit.*

4.4.4.3 Assumptions made by heterosexuals

Participants shared how they are regularly faced with assumptions by heterosexual people and couples; assumptions that generally stigmatise the LGBITIQ community and the way they live their relationships.

Anna and Maria on people assuming that gay and lesbian individuals fall for every man or woman they encounter.

Anna: *Something that really bothers me is that some straight people think that for example a gay man, will automatically be attracted to every an. We have standards and likes of our own. My boss said this today and I'm like saying to myself, maaa how can you be so ignorant.*

Maria: *..If a woman is interacting with a lesbian, she's gonna hit on her.*

Richard on how straight people have this need to label them as the woman & the man in the same-sex relationship.

> Richard: *But within the gay life, they always say, this is the woman and this is the man. And I really really hate that.*

Lara on how people should stop labelling same-sex relationships and just refer to everyone in a relationship as a couple without highlighting the sexual orientation.

> Lara: *I think the more people look as same sex couples as being just a couple, the easier life would be for everyone. The distinction is unnecessary.*

Maria on how people do not care about asking personal questions, and they feel it's their right to know. She shares how people should educate themselves and it's fine to ask questions – within reason and with respect.

> Maria: *Educate yourself. If you want to ask questions, ask, cause maybe it's not something normal for everyone, maybe they've been raised in a very strict religious kind of thing like family, childhood, whatever. It's OK to ask, but ask in an educational way. And not you come and ask me, I'm going to be honest, how do we have sex, cause people have asked us that.*

Fiona, on people's perceptions on the wedding attire between two women.

> Fiona: *For example, something that people asked us: you're both going to wear a dress? Who is wearing a suit? Automatically they assume that one of us is wearing a suit. We*

were both in dresses, in the sense, why not? They always have to assume that in a lesbian couple, one of them should be wearing a more masculine style.

Lara, whose point is echoed by Karl and Richard, on how heterosexual people assume that all gay and lesbian individuals and couples must know each other. It might seem innocuous, but it can be a hurtful assumption to make.

Lara: *I can't say we frequent many lesbian couples because we happen to know a few, but it's not because we chose...I don't feel that because they're in a same sex relationship, we're going to be friends. We don't see that as a determing factor to be friends....Do you know him or her? At a point there was a gay couple living in the apartment downstairs. The lady next to us was like: Do you know them? And I responded: Why should I know them? But in their head it's like we all know each other. That's the mentality.*

Karl: *I mean this on a good note, cause there are people who wouldn't think they are offending you but they would say: he's like you ta!.*

Richard*: God…..'like you'….those words…..'like you'*

4.4.4.4 Minority Stress

All the above examples might seem relatively harmless and frivolous; however, same-sex couples may feel weighed down by the accumulation of these situations, that are unique to same-sex relationships and that compound over time to cause additional, unnecessary stress. The manner in which the individuals in the couple and the couple itself react to these stressors

is very different as people respond differently to different triggers. Dealing with such stress may at times create conflict within the couples. Reflecting this within a social constructionist position, the minority stress being experienced by same-sex couples is a result of the heteronormative view of intimate relationship as a social construct within the Maltese culture.

Elisa on being rejected by a family member who she was close to before she and Lara came out with their relationship:

> Elisa: *"I had gone to her house to speak to her, and she started telling me that I'm not normal. I told her not to say that again, that I came to speak to her to find some common ground, sort of. She told me that she can never treat Lara like she treats my cousin's spouses. I told her that I was sorry to hear that. She kept repeating that I'm not normal and I told her that if she won't stop saying that I'll walk out, she repeated it, and I got up and left".*

Most couples in this study narrated that the way they deal with minority stress has brought them closer together. They chose to reframe the situation and accept that facing opposition is part of their life as a same-sex couple – even though they wish the situation were different. This shows a significant amount of resilience both on an individual and a couple level. Couples managed to attain a closer bond by surrounding themselves with people who support their relationship and avoiding (as much as possible) people and situations who are clearly not good for them. While this may sound simple enough, it is painful for the participants, as receiving rejection, discrimination and random judgments brings about emotional suffering that they need to process – on an ongoing basis.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This study aims to answer the research question: ***This is Us: Co-creating & living a same-sex relationship in Malta. How do same sex couples co-create & experience their couplehood in Malta?***

My interest in this topic developed as currently, same-sex couples in Malta have learned about relationships. Therefore, I was curious to understand more about dynamics such as:

- How did they learn about creating an intimate relationship?
- Who did they learn from?
- How did the Maltese context shape the creating of their relationship?
- How does the Maltese context influence the way they live their relationship?

5.2 Key Findings

The key findings of this research indicate that gay couples looked towards their parents for inspiration on how to model their couplehood, notwithstanding the difference in sexual orientation. The lessons that they learned included aspects that the participants chose to replicate as well as others that they preferred to do differently.

The couples' beliefs about romantic relationships, which they developed through their family of origin, and later through negotiation with their partner, served as a map upon which to create their own relationship. Where beliefs differed between the couple, they mutually negotiated the way forward.

The findings shed light on the experience of living a same-sex relationship in Malta, which despite the legal advancements is still rife with discrimination. For the participants, the reasons to get married went beyond the romantic side of wanting to share a future; they want to be recognised as a couple in the case of an emergency. Other aspects highlighted in the research include the implications of people's reactions to the participants' romantic relationship, religion, and assumptions made by heterosexuals that influence the couple's relationship. While the purpose of this study was not to research discrimination against the LGBTIQ community, the participants mentioned this theme that is part of their experience of being in a same-sex relationship in Malta.

Prior to conducting this research, my hypothesis was that same-sex couples model their relationships differently to heterosexual couples; however, the results of my research indicate that sexual orientation does not seem to matter when discussing what influences individuals and couples in creating their relationships. My assumptions might reflect the bias or prejudice of the wider context in Malta, whereby the societal narrative implies that same-sex couples are different, while this research suggests that they're not.

5.3 Discussion of Results

5.3.1 Learning through observing the Family of Origin

The family of origin and the patterns of interaction within the family influence the development of romantic relationships (Jamison & Lo, 2020). Findings indicated that the participants learned the most about creating intimate relationships from their family of origin.

The participants' narratives indicate that observing how their parents related to each other, their parenting style, and other factors experienced when they were younger influenced their ideas about creating a romantic relationship as adults. Lessons from family of origin offered valuable information by providing positive and negative examples (Sibley et al., 2015). Some participants learned about the importance of perseverance in a marriage through their parents, and they credit this lesson to being able to overcome adversities within their own relationship.

Conversely some participants shared how their parents' relationship created inner conflict for them later in life when experiencing their own romantic relationships. Such as Elisa, who had to learn that conflict management is a normal component of a romantic relationship and needed to find some middle ground with her wife whose own family of origin have an open communication style. This is supported by Sibley et al. (2015), who hold that negative examples from the family of origin offer valuable information.

5.4 My impressions

I noticed that even though a couple may share a similar family background, this can still result in very different assumptions and 'mapping' of relationships. For example, Maria witnessed her parents' constant disagreements that resulted in a fear of commitment for her as an adult. Meanwhile, her wife's parents separated when Anna was in her early 20s; however, unlike Maria, Anna feels that this did not affect her views on romantic relationships. She maintained that she always wanted to settle down with a significant other and this remained unchanged even following her parents' separation.

Could this difference be a result of the attachment style of the child-parent relationship, which in turn has an impact on how intimate others are seen? (Amato & Patterson, 2016). Attachment Theory was not included as one of the frameworks in this study due to word count limitations; however, it would be an interesting perspective through which to explore the formation of same-sex relationships focusing on the impact of the couples' attachment styles on marital satisfaction.

Sharing similar components from the family of origin that makes for a smoother integration of scripts for both parties within the couple. Does that mean that couples who come from very similar backgrounds, just copy and paste and move forward, assuming this to be the best way to live their relationship? While it is often smoother, there is the possibility of a missed opportunity to explore different narratives, where one simply chooses an intentional and deliberate way forward. This tallies with empirical research that indicates that the changing nature of the marital relationship is influenced by both the lasting impact of the parent-child relationship and the lessons about relationships that the child absorbed through their interactions with their parents (Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

While we tend to look for similarities when creating relationships because it is more comfortable and aligns with what we know, I think that this limits the richness that the differences and the unknown could bring to the table. This was indicated by participants who shared how their differences enabled them to learn from each other, providing them with the opportunity to grow both individually and as a couple.

I recall that during the interviews, especially the first one or two, I was surprised that the couple's sexual orientation in relation to learning about relationships was not mentioned. My hypothesis was that same-sex couples would struggle with learning about relationships from their family of origin because they were reading off a heterosexual template, while creating a same-sex relationship.

5.5 Couples' Beliefs and Values about Romantic Relationships

Participants elaborated on the values that they embrace as a couple and how these serve as a map to navigate their relationship. This theme provided some answers to the research question: 'How do same-sex couples create their couplehood?' Participants narrated that shared beliefs and values are central to their relationship formation.

Acknowledging the theme of learning from the family of origin, it is important to note that children's observations of their parents' romantic relationships can have an enduring impact on their own adulthood, shaping their core beliefs about relationships. These observations can influence their views on commitment, whether positive or negative, and shape the way they interact with their romantic partners (Jamison & Lo, 2020). The participants experience this

influence in different measures, with some couples finding it relatively easy to agree on their common core values, while others needed to negotiate.

Communication is a value that all participating couples chose as one of their core values as a couple. Married couples with children felt that it was challenging to have stress-free and uninterrupted conversations. Elisa and Lara, who had just returned from their first weekend break without their children, shared how great it felt to have an uninterrupted conversation, and realised that most of their disagreements are rooted in differences regarding their co-parenting practises, since they didn't argue at all during their trip when their children weren't present.

Most participants highlighted that their relationships are built on a foundation of friendship before any romantic involvement. These relationships are characterized by a strong sense of connection, affection, attentive listening, mutual understanding, and an earnest effort to meet each other's emotional needs. The individuals demonstrate a high level of attentiveness to each other's experiences and prioritise maintaining a deep emotional bond (Sibley et al., 2015). Fiona and her wife credit the long conversations they used to have before they were romantically involved to the success of their relationship. They feel that a deep friendship, trust, and respect was already formed before they fell in love with each other. They share that they notice the difference between them and other couples that do not prioritise communication and time alone together. This is echoed by Yoo et al. (2013), who hold that couples who lack communication processes experience intimacy between them. Connecting through communication appears to be a main pillar in all the same-sex relationships within this study.

It is important to highlight the participant bias – that all couples feel that they have a healthy level of communication and credit it as part of the relationship success – as this poses the question: would couples who do not feel comfortable in their relationship have participated in the research study?

Since the couples would need to share personal aspects of their relationship with me as a researcher, it is highly likely that couples who are experiencing issues in their relationship did not feel comfortable with participating in the study; this needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the results to avoid generalisations.

Unlike the previous couple, Elisa and Lara shared that they had a complex journey with communicating as a couple, since Elisa was uncomfortable speaking about her emotions while Lara is very open. Although narrowing this gap was not easy Elisa made the effort to be more open about her feelings, while Lara learned to attune to Elisa's emotions rather than waiting for her to speak about them. Being able to openly communicate their vulnerabilities and provide mutual validation for each other's self-disclosure, increased the sense of intimacy between them (Yoo et al., 2013). During the interview I recall that Lara was clearly comfortable with expressing herself and I noticed her offering encouraging glances towards Elisa when sharing uncomfortable information. This was indicative of the progress they made in learning how to communicate more effectively as a couple.

During the interviews, I could witness the couples' communication patterns, where the majority of couples displayed well-defined boundaries, which enabled them to give each other sufficient time and space to express their own perspectives and express themselves individually. As a

result, they actively participated in shaping the nature of the interview narrative together (Strong et al., 2014).

5.6 The Evolution of the Romantic Relationship Towards Marriage

Most of the participants believe that marriage holds significance, primarily because it offers financial and legal advantages, establishes credibility within relationships, and symbolises an equal level of commitment as seen in heterosexual couples (Haas & Whitton, 2015). Most of the married couples in this study stated that once they realised that their partner was 'the one', the road to the wedding was not the fully romantic ride that one would expect.

Participants shared how stories from the LGBTIQ community influenced their decision to get married sooner rather than later. They felt an urgency into getting married for fear of not being recognised as each other's loved one in formal, serious, or life-threatening situations. During the interviews, I remember that the participants spoke with a sense of urgency, and even though the respective couples were already married, I could still read the angst in their facial expressions. This issue has significant value for gay couples that possibly extends beyond that of straight couples.

While at face value the issues brought up [for unmarried couples] appear to be similar to those experienced by heterosexual couples, the participants' experiences shed a different light. An unmarried heterosexual couple is viewed as a legitimate couple in the eyes of society (Rostosky et al., 2016). Therefore, in the case of a medical emergency a heterosexual partner would likely

be allowed to stay next to their loved one (whether legally married or not), based on the views of society on heterosexual relationships, whereas the situation might develop differently for a same-sex couple, whose relationship is not always viewed legitimately in the eyes of others (Rostosky et al., 2016). Thus, the couple would depend on the benevolence and hopefully lack of homophobia of the assisting medical personnel to be allowed in.

The age difference between Anna and Maria played a part in their decision to get married. Anna, being older than Maria, did not want to pressure the latter into marriage unless she too felt ready. Therefore, despite wishing to propose, she took a step back to allow Maria to propose in her own time. Maria states that this felt freeing, considering her fear of committed relationships based on her parents' marriage (Amato & Patterson, 2016). On reflection, I find this to be thought provoking. In heterosexual couples, it is the gender rather than the age that is generally the determining factor of who will propose, with the man generally expected to propose regardless of any age gap that may exist. Thus, in a similar situation to Anna and Maria, the dynamic and societal expectation of the proposal does not change in a heterosexual couple where the man is older than the woman,. The narrative of whether the younger partner would be ready for marriage commitment is overlooked and the focus is on the man proposing to the woman. In the absence of societal gender expectations, Anna and Maria were able to focus on the age and readiness to commit.

The wish to become parents also featured in the decision-making process to get married. The couples who intended to adopt children shared that the timing of the wedding was a factor to ensure that they would not waste precious time to start the adoption process as a couple; one couple brought the wedding date forward. While the same regulations might apply for

heterosexual couples, it is important to point out that same-sex couples can adopt children from far fewer countries than heterosexual couples, so getting married sooner, carries more weight than it would for a heterosexual couple.

It is clear that some of the reasons that led the couples to marriage would probably not be deciding factors for heterosexual couples; especially relationship recognition in the eyes of family and society at large (Rostosky et al., 2016). Same-sex couples chose to speak extensively about their experiences of minority stress, indicating that it still is prevalent locally and a challenge that gay individuals and couples face daily.

5.7 Living a same-sex relationship in Malta

5.7.1 Experiences of Minority Stress

Minority stress refers to the persistent social stress experienced by individuals who belong to stigmatised social groups surpassing the general stressors of everyday life. When examining the context of LGBTIQ individuals, minority stress comprises five key components: (a) encounters with discrimination, (b) anticipation of rejection, (c) concealment of their identities, (d) grappling with internalized homonegativity, and (e) the development of coping strategies as a response to these factors (Gray et al., 2006). Stressors arising from social situations, which involve individuals having to adjust themselves intrapersonally, interpersonally, or within their environment, can negatively impact one's overall well-being and is associated with lower relationship quality for same-sex couples (Frost et al., 2017).

One cannot discuss the formation of same-sex relationships within a systemic study without delving into the societal background. It is interesting to note the various points raised by the participants highlight the added layers of complexity and stress of being in a same-sex relationship. One of the themes brought forth by most participants is the disparity between the legislative advancements and the actual experience of being in a same-sex relationship in Malta in 2023. While legislation is quite advanced, people in same-sex relationships still experience hate speech and discrimination regularly.

These findings tally with a survey conducted in 2019 by the European Commission, which examined perceptions of discrimination based on sex characteristics, sexual orientation, and gender identity; it was revealed that 53% of Europeans believe that discrimination against gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals is prevalent in their country (Shreeves, 2020). Frost (2020) has echoed a comparable viewpoint regarding the experience of minority stress at the couple level, resulting from the persistent social stigma faced by same-sex relationships.

As the couples narrated their stories it became clear that minority stress has a negative impact on same-sex relationships; however, most of the couples' shared experiences indicated that their way of dealing with minority stress as a couple brought them closer (Frost, 2014). While participants wish that they did not have to encounter such stressful situations, they have created redemption stories whereby they transition from experiencing negative emotions to either growth or another positive emotional state (Frost, 2014). By creating a new narrative through supporting each other and being selective as to whom they include in their social circles they found ways to improve their connection and psychological well-being (Frost, 2014). While the

participant's creativity and resilience are to be commended, I find myself reflecting on why LGBTIQ individuals and couples still have to be subjected to minority stress in 2023? Especially considering that Malta's legislative framework and social policies are rather advanced when compared to other countries.

5.7.2 Showing affection in public

All participants mentioned the theme of showing affection in public when speaking about their experience of being in a same-sex relationship in Malta. Findings tally with research, whereby same-sex couples feel that they need to be vigilant of their surroundings when showing affection towards each other (Shreeves, 2020). Some have learned to joke about it and use humour to combat such situations. For example, if Anna hugs Maria in public, Maria jokes with her that "here's not safe and they'll burn us at the stake here" Anna agrees with Maria that they are always on the "alert".

This dynamic of feeling limited or uneasy while being out in the street as a 'couple' is a form of minority stress that links to the previous sub theme. I noted that some couples stated that they do not 'need' to show affection in public, or that they are not 'that type of couple'. Could this be the way they have been conditioned to view affection towards each other as a same-sex couple? Has the social construct of same-sex relationships being seemingly inferior to heterosexual relationships (Traustadóttir, 2001) conditioned them to not feel entitled to display affection towards each other in the same way that a heterosexual couple would?

5.7.3 Same sex-relationships in Religious Malta

The Church in Malta has a strong influence on the morality of the social community (Deguara, 2019). Most participants shared experiences of discriminate treatment, judgemental comments, and emotional pain caused by religious communities or members of the clergy. Contrastingly, one couple shared their experience of being in a good relationship with their religious community, which they frequented before they formed their romantic relationship.

Most of the participants feel judged and excluded by the religious community that derives its sexual ethics from Catholic doctrine (Deguara 2019). Anna and Maria feel at a loss as to where they stand with regard to religion. They find it hard to place religion in their life as a same-sex couple and this situation becomes increasingly mind-boggling for them when they think of raising children together. I believe that it is important to note that traditions like Catechism, apart from imparting religious teachings also serve as a social interaction for many children in Malta. Thus, Anna and Maria's indecisiveness might also be shared by other individuals, who are not necessarily part of the LGBTIQ community, but who also feel marginalised by the church. Since secular and religious traditions are deeply intertwined in Malta, how possible it is to detach from every aspect of the church?

Contrastingly, Rita and Fiona were very active within their religious community before becoming a couple and met through the same religious community. One of their main concerns when they announced their relationship was whether they would be shunned by the religious community which they so loved. Nevertheless, this was a risk they were willing to take. Their community, while needing some time to process their relationship, kept a constant welcoming

and warm stance towards them. Presently, they are still welcomed and active in the religious community, which is important for them as they consider the Catholic Faith to be an important component of their relationship.

This divergence of experiences, albeit on a small scale and not representative of the whole LGBTIQ community, could indicate that while the Roman Catholic church as an institution does not formally recognise same-sex relationships, members of the religious community have found ways to make their organisations more inclusive for LGBTIQ members.

The above is supported by Deguara (2019), who holds that it is not unusual for faithful individuals to create their own personalised sets of values that deviate from orthodox and authoritative interpretations of Catholic beliefs and moral principles. This reflects the experience of some of the participants in how they have chosen to embrace spirituality based on Catholic principles and values, although they are not practising Roman Catholics. Since the religious aspect was not the aim of this study this topic was not delved into further. However, I was left thinking about the emotional pain that people within the LGBTIQ community might experience by having to create a new way to live their spirituality – such circumstance being brought about through marginalisation.

5.7.4 Assumptions made by heterosexuals

Being a heterosexual researcher inquiring into the lives of same-sex couples I felt that it was important to ask the participants about their experiences through assumptions made by

heterosexuals. All the participants were able to contribute their experiences, indicating the lack of education about the LGBTIQ community and their relationships in Maltese society.

One of the assumptions that the participants joked about was the assumption made by heterosexual people that all LGBTIQ individuals will fall in love or have sex with anyone of their same gender. Despite the participants presenting this as a joke, they shared that they feel humiliated by this common assumption and reiterated that they too have their own likes and dislikes. They feel that this assumption devalues the intimacy, feelings, and love that they feel in their relationships. This viewpoint tallies with research as the societal conversation surrounding romantic relationships and the associated significance often sends a message to the LGBTIQ community that their relationships are considered lesser or inferior when compared to heterosexual relationships (Felicio & Sutherland, 2001).

Other assumptions narrated by the participants include the assumption that in a wedding between two women one of them must be wearing a tuxedo. This echoes Richard's and Karl's comments that people tend to ask who the "man" is and who the "woman" is in the relationship. Another assumption is that LGBTIQ people would probably all know each other just because they are "the same"; Richard shares that he hates it when someone refers to another gay man as, "he's like you, I reckon you must know him". Some heterosexual individuals also feel at liberty to ask very personal questions to same-sex couples, such as, "how do two women have sex since…?"

While most participants found some of these assumptions to be laughable, they feel that others verge on harassment and are stressful to mitigate on a day-to-day basis. Most times dealing with these assumptions feels heavy and unnecessary, causing added stress to their life and

relationship (Frost et al., 2017). During the interviews, the participants' tone of voice indicated a level of frustration and 'we're so over this' attitude, which I fully empathise with considering the full range of social contexts affecting the experience of being in a same-sex relationship in Malta (Frost et al., 2017). Based on my conversation with the participants, they wish to stop being seen as so different from heterosexuals. Societal markers have identified them through their sexual orientation (Riker, 2022), which is only part of their identity. However, recounting the experiences they shared, people seem to view them only from the sexual orientation perspective and not as a human being as a whole.

One important aspect to note is that while the above-mentioned assumptions do affect the participants, they also exhibited powerful characteristics and strengths (Traustadóttir, 2001). I believe that it is important to highlight this to portray the true picture of the participants who are strong individuals with specific talents, some holding leadership positions who are valued by their peers (Traustadóttir, 2001).

5.8 Reflexivity: How this research project connected with me personally

Upon reflection of the process of this research and my own experience of couplehood in a heterosexual relationship in Malta, I observed that my own process of creating my relationship with my husband was very similar to the participants' journey. Our relationship formation process took us on a journey of self-discovery, understanding what works and what doesn't from our respective parents' templates and which aspects of societal expectations we want to subscribe to as a married couple and parents.

On the other hand, something that elicited a sense of helplessness and sadness in me was the minority stress that same-sex couples go through as part of their daily lives. Until we settled down to start the interview I observed these couples, often in their own homes, noting their chit chat in offering me a drink, settling the kids in a separate room, apologising if the house was a bit cluttered, and so on; it was like watching a vignette of me and my husband or any other couple I know. Indoors, the relevance of the couple's gender dissipated; however, once they interact with the outside world, they are seen different, at times inadequate, just because of the person they chose to love and marry.

The likeness of the relationship formation also surprised me. Seeing that same-sex couples are reading off a heterosexual template, I had hypothesised that they would have found it more complex to learn about relationships since the type of relationship they are living was not represented in their families of origin. It felt refreshing to have my hypothesis disproved. To me this means that humans are more alike than we think and labels are unnecessary because they really do not define us.

I learned a lot through this experience. I felt uneasy listening to some of the stories shared by the participants, such as Elisa and Lara's experience of having strangers showing up at their wedding venue to protest same-sex marriage. Or Karl & Richard's wedding guest who refused to attend because he did not want to expose his children to two men kissing. While listening to these experiences my inner dialogue questioned whether I can represent the participant's views (Traustadóttir, 2001), considering my privilege as a heterosexual woman, married to a man, living in a heteronormative society, bearing in mind that some theorists claim that one can only

be fully empathetic with another when the two are fully alike (Riker, 2022). I became increasingly aware that I am conducting research within a group where I do not belong (Traustadóttir, 2001).

While I cannot claim to have shared the same experiences as my research participants, I acknowledge that I have been through 'similar' experiences that help me relate to them. I have been made to feel like an 'outsider' in society when I got separated from my first husband and consequently became a single mother; I felt devalued and marginalised by the larger society. These experiences, while not the same as those of my research participants, helped me relate and highlight the unexpected parallels of living in traditional, religious Malta (Traustadóttir, 2001).

5.9 Limitations and Future Research

Qualitative research contributes towards bringing forth unique experiences and meanings; however, when combined with quantitative approaches more representative facts can emerge. Therefore, while this study elicited meanings and stories that are significant and were shared by most of the participants, there is a limitation as the sample size is too small to draw generalised conclusions.

Furthermore, out of the five couples, only one couple was male, so the indications of the results mirror mostly the experience of lesbian couples in Malta. Therefore, it would be interesting if a similar study was carried out with a more balanced sample that included more male couples.

Further research that investigates the couple's attachment styles in relation to their relationship satisfaction would make for an interesting and valuable angle (attachment was not included as one of the frameworks in this study due to word count limitations.) Further research is suggested around minority stress and its impact on relationships for same-sex couples in Malta as this seems to be a lacuna in local LGBTIQ research.

It is important to note that the couples who participated in this study were those who have managed to successfully negotiate their relationship; do couples who have relationship difficulties struggle with their template and the formation of their relationship? Further studies that focus on gay couples with more unconventional lifestyle choices – how do they construct their couplehood? – would also be interesting.

5.10 A systemic understanding of findings

Looking at the findings through a systemic perspective, highlights that various themes are not only addressed independently but are also interrelated with one another. The everyday dynamics of a romantic relationship are intertwined with the effects of minority stress, prompting a need on the couple for introspection on emotional management and fostering unity between them. This emotional management nurtures commitment, subsequently building trust and promoting further development in the relationship. In the context of a same-sex relationship, the growth and development of the relationship, as well as the conscious choice

to maintain harmony in their private life, even in the face of challenges such as minority stress, have a significant impact on the day-to-day interactions within the relationship.

This means that as the relationship evolves and matures, and the partners actively decide to navigate the difficulties associated with being in a same-sex relationship, they exert a positive influence on how they interact with each other on a daily basis. Their commitment to addressing the unique challenges they may encounter due to their minority status enhances their emotional connection and strengthens their bond as a couple. This, in turn, fosters a more supportive and understanding dynamic between them as they face the world together. Thus, the growth of the relationship and the intentional effort to cultivate a harmonious private life despite external pressures profoundly influence how the partners in this study, communicate, support, and navigate their relationship in their day-to-day lives.

While the main objective of this research was to investigate the process of relationship formation in same-sex couples, it became evident that the participants were more inclined to discuss their experiences with minority stress rather than focusing solely on relationship formation. This could mean that discussing relationship satisfaction and their relationship journey is not at the forefront of the couples' thinking. Issues related to minority stress reside closely within their life experiences and are a predominant worry which they shared when given the opportunity to do so. This is important because although as a society we speak of equal rights and inclusion, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is still a very present issue for same-sex couples. The couples interviewed still very much harbour preoccupation with how their relationship is perceived publicly. Consequently, it is plausible

that this aspect accounts for the participants' heightened focus on minority stress, overshadowing the original research question.

Prior to undertaking this research, my hypothesis was that the experience of relationship formation for same-sex couples in Malta, would differ from that of heterosexual couples. However, analyzing the findings through a systemic lens revealed that the sexual orientation of the couple did not play a significant role in the process of forming their relationships. This sheds light on the assumptions held by Malta's heteronormative society regarding how same-sex couples are perceived. Despite having a different sexual orientation and diverging from the societal heteronormative template, LGBTIQ relationships were found to be comparable to heterosexual ones in the context of couple formation for the couples participating in this research.

These assumptions made by the larger and dominant group (heterosexuals) possibly create an environment that fosters minority stress experienced by same-sex couples. Minority stress influences how these couples navigate their relationships publicly, leading to certain aspects, like engaging in fewer public displays of affection, due to fear or concern of harassment. This avoidance of public affection further contributes to the perception of same-sex relationships as "other" and are not normalized within society, despite legal advancements in favor of the LGBTIQ community. Another significant aspect contributing to this point is the path to marriage for the participants in this study. The concerns they encountered during their journey to marriage were unique and not commonly experienced by heterosexual couples. For instance, they expressed worries about their relationship not being recognized in emergencies when they were not married yet. These concerns highlight that the distinctions between living in a same-

sex relationship versus a heterosexual one, might primarily arise from how Maltese society perceives and understands same-sex relationships. Consequently, same-sex couples adapt to mitigate the complexities and stress that such perceptions create within their relationships.

In summary, my initial hypothesis about the formation of same-sex relationships being different from heterosexual ones was challenged by the research's findings. Noting that my own hypothesis mirrors the perception of society at large, keeping I mind that I am a heterosexual woman, living in the same societal narratives as the participants. The study highlights the impact of assumptions and minority stress on same-sex couples' experiences and public behavior, perpetuating a narrative of otherness within society, even as legal progress is made.

5.11 Therapeutic Implications

Research studies in Malta seem to be limited in their interest to the formation of same-sex couples; most studies focus on heterosexual couples. This presents a significant constraint in clinical practice due to potential variations in sociocultural patterns, hence, this research investigation could serve as a valuable resource. I believe that this study has the potential to assist practitioners in directing their attention towards specific factors when engaging with same-sex couples and individuals from the LGBTIQ community.

6 CONCLUSION

The main aim of this study was to understand how same-sex couples co-create and experience living a same-sex relationship in Malta. This study indicates that the relationship formation was predominantly influenced by the couples' Family of Origin. Through observing their parents' marriage growing up they learned about values, beliefs, and commitment. Participants chose to replicate aspects of the way their parents lived in their own relationship, while at times opting to change the narrative in other aspects to create their own unique intimate relationship. This study determined that the sexual orientation of the couple did not have an impact on the way the dynamics and beliefs of the couple were negotiated.

Before commencing this research, I held a hypothesis suggesting that same-sex couples would exhibit distinct relationship dynamics compared to heterosexual couples; however, the research findings demonstrate that sexual orientation appears to have little influence on the factors shaping individuals' and couples' relationships. The assumptions I initially held may have been influenced by the bias or prejudice prevailing in the broader Maltese context, where societal narratives imply differences between same-sex couples. Nevertheless, this research indicates that these couples are not as dissimilar as commonly perceived.

Despite significant strides in the legal landscape concerning LGBTIQ rights, individuals in same-sex relationships in Malta continue to encounter minority stress. The research findings reveal that same-sex couples are still confronted with presumptions from heterosexual

individuals regarding their LGBTIQ identity and being in a same-gender relationship. Additionally, participants still endure discrimination based on their sexual orientation.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Recruitment Letter
Appendix 2: Consent Form
Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

Appendix 1: Recruitment Letter

Information Sheet for Research

Name of the Researcher: Olivia Bilocca

Title of Research: This is Us: Co-creating & living a same-sex relationship in Malta. How do same sex couples co-create & experience their couplehood in Malta?

Introducing Myself

I am Olivia, I work in Human Resources & Coaching, and I am also currently reading for my Masters in Systemic Psychotherapy Degree at the Institute of Family Therapy, Malta. I am undertaking my research study in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the mentioned degree.

Some information about my research project

Through my research I would like to learn more and understand how same sex couples in Malta invest in creating their relationships together. Some of the topics that we would be exploring together are:

- How are roles negotiated and agreed within the couple?
- What has influenced the way you as a couple deal with conflict?
- Who have been the people in your life who influenced your ideas about relationships?
- How did you and your partner/spouse blend your ideas together to create your own relationship?

Your participation & contribution my research will help me collect the necessary data to fulfil the thesis & learn more about the background and dynamics of LGBTIQ relationships.

If you need further information, I will be happy to answer your queries and clarify any points you wish to elaborate upon.

What would be participating involve for you?

If you decide to participate, we will have an interview together. We could meet at a location which is most comfortable to you (your home, my office, or any other location you prefer). The interview is expected to last between an hour and an hour and a half and we will discuss the themes mentioned in the previous section.

With your consent, I will record the interview so that I can work on the analysis at a later stage. Recordings of interviews will not be shared, and the data will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

Voluntary Participation – Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate in this study and have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without experiencing

repercussions. If you withdraw from the study, all the records and information collected will be destroyed within three (3) weeks from notification of withdrawal. If you wish to withdraw, please send me an email to inform me.

Risks and Benefits

The interview might cause some distress if we talk about sensitive issues. Completion of this study will contribute to building the knowledge on same-sex relationships in the Maltese islands. In addition, this will promote further research and development. If you feel uncomfortable or distressed, let me know and we will discuss any support you might find helpful, provided by IFT-Malta Clinic or any other professional service of your choice.

Confidentiality

I appreciate that safeguarding your confidentiality is an important concern for you. I will ensure that any identifiable information about you does not find itself in any of my writing. I will change your name to a pseudonym of your choice and will be using it throughout my research. If you would like to, I will show you what I am writing so that you can ask for any changes, to ensure you feel comfortable with what has been written.

The data will be kept on my files which are cloud based. The files will saved in a password protected folder, and I am the only person with access to the folder.

The raw data collected (the recordings of the interview and the transcription) will be destroyed following the successful completion of the study. Under the Data Protection Act Chapter 586 of Maltese Law and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU2016/679), you, as a participant have the right to access, rectify or erase the data concerning you.

Sharing the Results

I will send you a copy of the completed research project containing the research findings. The completed research project will be submitted in partial completion of my Master's degree and may be published more broadly in relevant Journals and presented at conferences.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this process, please contact me:

Ms Olivia Bilocca , Researcher – IFT Malta

Mobile number: 00356 99632674

E-mail address: olivia.bilocca@ift-malta.com

If at any point you feel the need to speak to my supervisor, Ms. Karen Bishop, Director, IFT-Malta, is contactable:

Ms. Karen Bishop, Supervisor – IFT Malta

Mobile number: 00356 79704058

E-mail address: karen.bishop@ift-malta.com

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Declaration of Consent for Research

Name of the Researcher: Olivia Bilocca

Institute of Family Therapy, Malta

Title of Research: This is Us: Co-creating & living a same-sex relationship in Malta. How do same sex couples co-create & experience their couplehood in Malta?

Please tick all the statements below:

◯ I have freely applied and been selected to participate in research titled: **How do same-sex couples construct their way of living couplehood? (The dissertation title is still work in progress).**

◯ I confirm that I have read and understood the above information, or it has been read to me and that I agree to participate in this study.

◯ I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research, and any questions I have asked to have been answered to my satisfaction.

◯ I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information.

◯ I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I am free to withdraw from the study up to 3 weeks after the interview, without giving a reason and without consequence of any kind.

◯ I understand that all data published will be anonymous and that there will not be any connection between the personal information provided during the interview and the published data.

◯ I understand that there are no known risks or hazards associated with participating in this study.

◯ I consent to be audio-recorded for the purpose of the research.

◯ I consent to my data being transcribed and that the data from the transcriptions will be kept confidential, and only the researcher will have access to it and will be kept until successful completion of thesis.

◯ I understand that my identity will remain anonymous in any form of dissemination, written or otherwise.

Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date

Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date

Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

Name of the Researcher: Olivia Bilocca

Institute of Family Therapy, Malta

Title of Research: This is Us: Co-creating & living a same-sex relationship in Malta. How do same sex couples co-create & experience their couplehood in Malta?

1. How long have you been together?
2. What would you like me to know about you as a couple?
3. As a heterosexual person, what would be important for me to know?
4. What have you learned about creating a relationship when you were younger?
5. Who did you learn from?
6. How did you construct what kind of couple you want to be?
7. How have you negotiated your roles in the couple?
8. How have you negotiated your different beliefs in couplehood to create your relationship?
9. How does your relationship compare with relationships of significant others? (e.g. siblings/friends/aunt/neighbour/parents etc).
10. What are the major challenges for gay/lesbian people to build a relationship?
11. Did you face these challenges yourselves as a couple?