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Queer #PolesinUK

Identity, Migration and Social Media

Dr Lukasz Szulc



This report is based on research conducted by Dr Lukasz Szulc between the beginning of 2017 and mid-2019 during his Marie Curie Individual Fellowship in the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science, under the supervision of Professor Myria Georgiou. It was financed by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme (grant number: 699745—FACELOOK—MSCA-IF-EF-ST).

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Executive summary

What does it mean, what does it feel like to be a queer person who migrated from Poland to the UK? This question is particularly pertinent now, when the Brexit referendum has provoked increased anti-migrant sentiments in the UK and the ruling Law and Justice Party in Poland has picked on queers as part of its populist agenda.

The lives and experiences of queer Poles in the UK—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender as well as other gender- and sexuality-diverse people, or LGBTQs—are not all the same.

Some are out to everyone who is important in their lives, others remain largely in the closet—for example, to their families in Poland—and need to carefully navigate their queer lives in different cultural contexts, especially on social media such as Facebook, which usually brings those different contexts together.

Some are fluent in English, others possess only basic English skills and heavily rely on other Polish migrants to find a job or accommodation and to access public services. Yet others speak English well but prefer to date only Polish people (and they use a Polish dating app to find them) to 'be able to fully share my passions and interests' with a future partner, as one participant in this research put it.

At the same time, queer Poles in the UK share many values, attitudes and opinions, often because they face similar struggles with anti-LGBTQ and anti-migrant discrimination. This report traces such similarities as well as differences, bringing to light the lives and experiences of queer Poles in the UK. It is based on the largest to date study of this

group, which consists of 767 survey responses and 30 interviews with a diverse group of LGBTQs.

Key findings include:

- Young participants are more likely to adopt gender- and sexuality-diverse identities such as genderfluid and pansexual
- Participants are more likely to be out to their friends in the UK than in Poland
- Participants are least likely to be out to their extended family members
- Work is the most popular main reason for moving to the UK
- LGBTQ issues are one of the reasons for moving to the UK for more than a quarter of participants
- Majority of participants are against Brexit but plan to stay in the UK
- Facebook is the most popular social media platform among participants and three fifths of them are out on the platform
- Gay male participants are most likely to use dating apps and to use them to arrange a sex date
- Polish social media and dating apps for LGBTQs are relatively popular among participants

These findings demonstrate that it is essential to challenge the invisibility of queer Poles in the UK in debates on identity, migration and social media to promote equality. This report brings the lives and experiences of queer Poles in the UK to the front of those debates and demands to recognise that not all migrants, not all Poles, are cisgender and heterosexual.

Introduction

Poles constitute the largest overseas-born group in the UK, with the numbers estimated at 832,000 for 2018¹. The majority of Poles in the UK have moved there after 2004, when Poland and nine other countries, mainly Central and Eastern European ones, joined the European Union (EU). The UK was one of the first countries to immediately open its job market to the new EU members.

While not entirely dissimilar from other Polish migrants, queer Poles in the UK—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender as well as other gender- and sexuality-diverse people, or LGBTQs²—face unique challenges of identity, belonging and migration, especially in recent years. They are confronted with growing anti-migrant sentiment in the UK in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum³, while Brexit itself may present new threats for LGBTQs⁴. They are also challenged by an intensified anti-LGBTQ climate in Poland, legitimised by the conservative Law and Justice Party after its win in the 2015 parliamentary election⁵.

While there is extensive research about Poles in the UK, large-scale studies of queer Poles in the UK are virtually non-existent⁶. Queer Poles are also invisible in much research on LGBTQs in the UK, including the results of the National LGBT Survey⁷, which were published by the Government Equalities Office in July 2018 and report only on respondents' 'ethnic group' (understood mainly in terms of race), with 92% of respondents choosing the option 'White'.

Mainstream media in both Poland and the UK hardly ever discuss the experiences of queer Poles in the UK. This is also reflected in the relative absence of queer content in Twitter

posts using a popular hashtag among the Polish community in the UK, #PolesinUK.

Moreover, some pro-Brexit campaigners, including the Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Out & Proud group of LGBTQs supporting Brexit, build some of their pro-Brexit arguments on exaggerated accounts of Poland, and Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, as anti-LGBTQ, suggesting the failure of the EU as a catalyst for LGBTQ equality⁸. Such rhetoric leaves not much space for the recognition of the lives and experiences of queer Poles in the UK⁹.

This report presents the results of the largest to date research about queer Poles in the UK, based on 767 valid responses to an online survey and 30 in-depth face-to-face interviews. It discusses gender and sexual identities of queer Poles in the UK, their experiences of coming out and migration, attitudes towards Brexit, and uses of social media and dating apps.

The report gives answers to such questions as:

- How do queer Poles in the UK navigate their gender and sexual identities across different cultural contexts?
- Who are they most likely to come out to?
- What were their reasons for moving to the UK?
- What do they think about Brexit?
- What are their plans for the future?
- What opportunities and challenges are created for them by the increasingly popular social media?

Methods

This report is based on 767 valid online survey responses and 30 in-depth face-to-face interviews with queer Poles in the UK.

The survey was designed using Qualtrics software and included both selected choice questions and free-text questions. All questions were reviewed by four academics and tested with three queer Poles in the UK.

Respondents needed to meet three eligibility criteria to participate in the survey:

- Identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or a person of non-normative gender or sexuality)
- Have now or had in the past Polish citizenship
- Live in the UK (England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland)

The survey was available only in Polish so respondents also needed to speak the language to participate in this research.

The survey ran online from mid-August to mid-September 2018 and was promoted through multiple channels, including social media platforms of LGBTQ and migrant organisations (e.g. Lambda Warszawa, Polish Rainbow in UK and Centrala Space), private messages on the biggest Polish LGBTQ website, Queer.pl, targeted advertising on Facebook and Instagram, as well as Twitter posts with the popular hashtag #PolesinUK. For participating in the survey, respondents could win one of

five £25 vouchers to an LGBTQ bookstore in London, Gay's The Word.

In total, 867 responses were received but 100 of them were removed during data cleaning, resulting in the final number of 767 valid responses. The majority of the removed responses (79) did not include answers to any questions apart from the eligibility questions. An additional 21 responses were removed for a variety of reasons, including duplicate and impossible responses.

At the same time, incomplete responses were included in the analysis if they answered at least one of the survey questions. Therefore, the number of total responses to different questions varies. The survey includes 632 valid and complete responses. Some totals may also not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Thirty interviewees were recruited out of 334 survey respondents who stated that they would like to participate in a face-to-face interview. All interviews were semi-structured and were conducted at the end of 2018 or the beginning of 2019 by Dr Lukasz Szulc in places chosen by the interviewees, usually at their homes or in cafés. Interviews lasted two hours each on average and were carried out in Polish, with some interviewees switching between Polish and English occasionally. Each interviewee received £45 for taking part in the interview as compensation for their time and expenses to attend the interview.

The majority of quotes in this report come from the interviews and some are the responses to free-text survey questions, all were translated from Polish into English.

Participants

The number of queer Poles in the UK is unknown, which makes it impossible to draw a representative sample of this group. This may change in the future as the Office for National Statistics in the UK plans to introduce questions about gender identity and sexual orientation in the 2021 Census¹⁰. Because the survey does not include a representative sample, statistical testing was not appropriate.

The recruitment strategy for the survey was to reach as many valid responses as possible. Survey respondents were self-selected and they show a considerable diversity in terms of gender (52% men or boys and 43% women or girls) and sexual identity (49% gay, 28% lesbian and 16% bisexual people). Additionally, 3% of respondents were transgender (for details, see the parts of this report on gender and sexual identity).

Survey respondents tend to be younger and better educated than the general population in Poland¹¹. At the time of research, 35% of respondents were between 12 and 24 years old, 21% between 25 and 29 years old, 33% in their 30s, and only 11% in their 40s or 50s. Nearly half of respondents (45%) completed higher education and another half (46%) completed secondary education, the latter number is likely to be related to the respondents' younger than average age.

The majority of respondents were based in England (81%), with 24% of all respondents living in London. A further 8% resided in Scotland, 2% in Wales and 2% in Northern Ireland. These numbers reflect the results of the National LGBT Survey conducted on the

general LGBTQ population in the UK, in which 108,100 respondents were mainly based in England (85%, including 19% of all respondents living in London), followed by Scotland (8%), Wales (4%) and Northern Ireland (2%)¹².

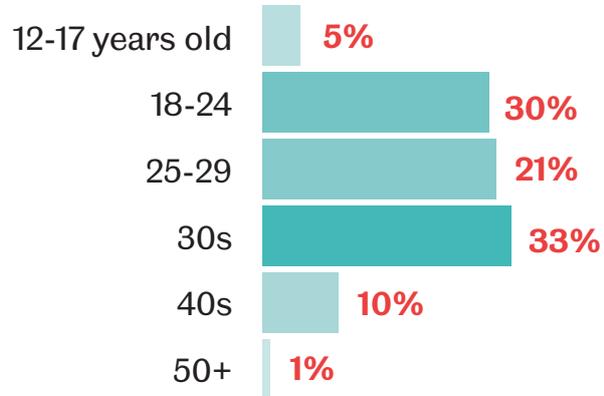
The recruitment strategy for interviews was not to reflect the composition of the self-selected sample of the survey but to maximise diversity of participants to learn about a wide range of lives and experiences of queer Poles in the UK. The selected interviewees included 11 gay men, 7 lesbian women, 4 gender-diverse people, 2 bisexual women, 2 queer trans men, 1 pansexual woman, 1 lesbian trans woman, 1 bisexual trans woman and 1 straight trans woman.

Similarly to survey respondents, interviewees are more likely to be younger and better educated than the general population in Poland. Half of them (15) were between 19 and 29 years old in 2018, 10 were in their 30s, 4 in their 40s and 1 in his 50s. More than half of the interviewees (16) completed higher education, 13 completed secondary education and 1 finished primary education. The majority was based in England (23, including 6 in London) and the rest in Scotland (4) and Northern Ireland (3).

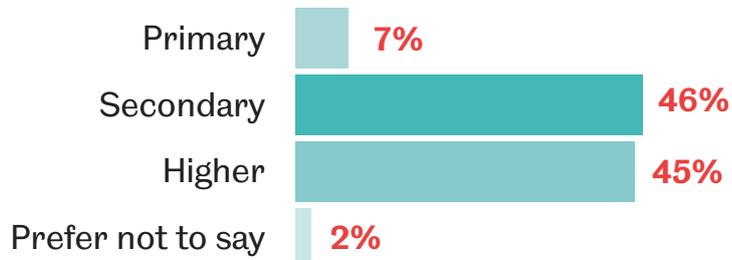
When reporting on participants' place of residence, I provide only the general region to ensure anonymity. For the same reason, I do not provide the exact age of participants.

Survey respondents by age, education and country of residence

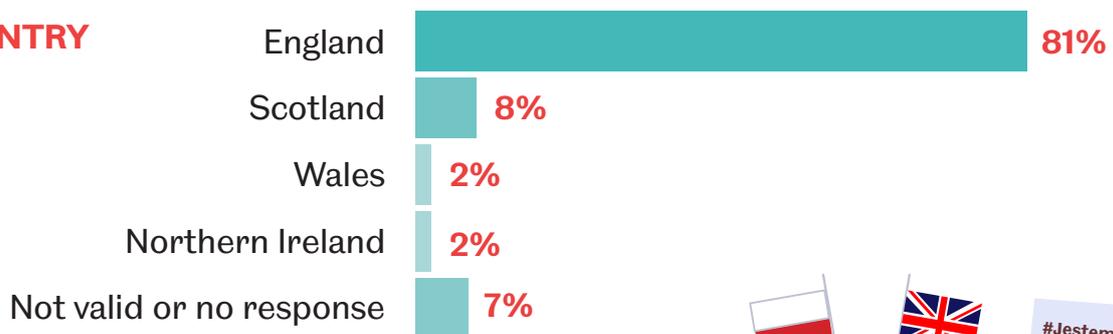
AGE



EDUCATION



COUNTRY



find ings

Gender identity

When asked 'Which of the following options best describes how you think about your gender?', the majority of 767 survey respondents answered either 'man/boy' (52%) or 'woman/girl' (43%). The remaining respondents identify either as gender-diverse (3%)—including the options 'non-normative/genderqueer/genderfluid' (20 respondents) and 'not listed, please specify' (2 respondents who identify as 'tomboy' and 'woman gnc (gender non-conforming)' respectively)—or transgender (1%). Five respondents chose the option 'prefer not to say' and no one in the sample identifies as 'intersex'.

These statistics underestimate the actual number of transgender people who participated in the survey because some of them identify simply as a 'man/boy' or 'woman/girl'. To arrive at a more detailed picture, I additionally asked the respondents which sex was assigned to them at birth with the available options 'female', 'male' and 'prefer not to say'. This allowed me to identify the total of 24 transgender respondents (3%), including 9 trans men, 7 trans women and 8 already mentioned self-identified transgender people.

The 22 respondents (3%) who chose gender-diverse identities tend to be younger than an average respondent with 15 of them being between 12 and 24 years old, 1 in their 20s, 5 in their 30s and 1 in their 40s at the time of research. Respondents between 12 and 24

years old are four times more likely than older respondents to adopt gender-diverse identities (5.7% and 1.4% of all respondents of respective age groups).

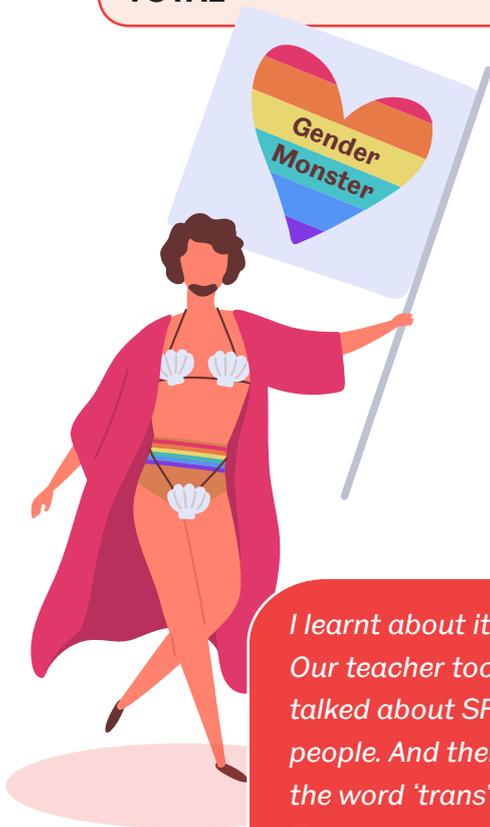
Gender-diverse identifications are becoming more popular among young LGBTQs in general and researchers show that social media play an important role in popularising and validating such identifications¹³.

Gender-diverse interviewees in this research used English terms to describe their gender identities, even though the interviews were in Polish. Some of them switched to English entirely when talking about their gender or sexual identities. They explained that they did not know how to talk about it in Polish, which does not necessarily point to the limitations of Polish language in this respect but rather to the fact that they learnt about those new identities from English-language sources.

All gender-diverse interviewees reported that they learnt about the new terms for gender from social media—particularly Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter and YouTube—which additionally points to the globalising role of social media for spreading English-language concepts of gender as well as sexuality. One interviewee said that she learnt about pansexuality by coming across the word on Instagram while searching for a hashtag #LGBTQ.

Which of the following options best describes how you think about your gender?

Answer	%	Count
Woman/girl	43%	332
Man/boy	52%	400
Transgender	1%	8
Intersex	0%	0
Non-normative/genderqueer/genderfluid	3%	20
Not listed, please specify	0.3%	2
Prefer not to say	0.7%	5
TOTAL	100%	767

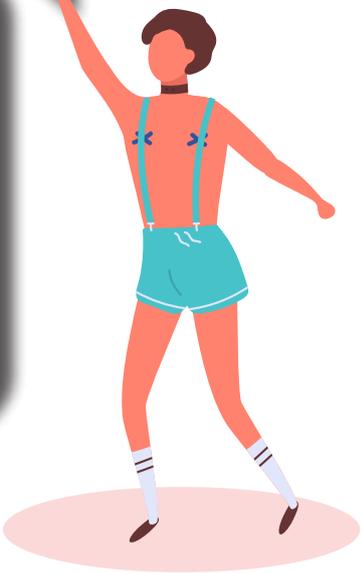


It's difficult to talk about identity in Polish because I don't live in this language. So while in English I get comfortable with the category 'non-binary' [pronounced in English], I have no idea how to translate it into Polish. It feels like I have an invented identity in English, which isn't the first language for me. I guess I'll work it out somehow in the future.

Queer non-binary person in their 30s in London

I learnt about it during my vocational school [in Poland]. Our teacher took us to a family-planning clinic where they talked about SRS [sex reassignment surgery] and transsexual people. And then I finally knew, who I was. [...] Why do I use the word 'trans'? Simply because I'm still before operation. True, I'll never be a cis person, I'll always be trans... But I'll be hiding that I'm trans if only I'll be able to do it. After all, the aim of my operation and therapy are to make my body, me in general, a cis person.

Lesbian trans woman in her 40s in the East of England



Sexual identity

When asked 'Which of the following options best describes how you think about your sexuality?', 49% of respondents answered 'gay', 28% 'lesbian' and 16% 'bisexual'. 6% of respondents chose other sexuality-diverse identities, including 'queer' (20 respondents), 'asexual' (6 respondents) and 'not listed, please specify' (14 respondents identify as 'pansexual' and three as 'demisexual', 'demisexual biromantic' and 'biromantic asexual' respectively). Ten respondents identify as 'heterosexual' and four chose the option 'prefer not to say'.

Similarly to the respondents who chose gender-diverse identities, those who chose sexuality-diverse identities (6% of respondents) tend to be younger than an average respondent. Respondents between 12 and 24 years old are two times more likely than older respondents to adopt sexuality-diverse identities (9.1% and 3.8% of all respondents of respective age groups).

Women and girls as well as young respondents are more likely than an average respondent to identify as bisexual. Women and girls are five times more likely than men and boys to identify as bisexual (28% and 6% of all women/girls and men/boys respectively). Nearly half of respondents between 12 and 17 years old identify as bisexual (46%), compared to one in five respondents between 18 and 29 years old (20%), and one in ten respondents who are 30 or older (12%).

Some interviewees mentioned it was critical for them to move to the UK to explore their gender and sexual identities. This highlights not only the fluidity of gender and sexuality but also the importance of context in exploring and living those identities. One trans woman mentioned in the interview that she was advised by her friends in Poland to 'tone down' her gender non-conforming look when visiting the country. At the same time, she reported on two cases of transphobic violence she experienced in Scotland, emphasising that the perpetrators were Central and Eastern European migrants.

Interviewees based in big cities—especially in London but also Brighton, Manchester and Edinburgh—expressed the general feeling of 'freedom' and 'openness', which they associated with those places and which translated for them into the possibility of freer gender and sexual self-expression, for example, in terms of haircut, make-up and clothes as well as holding hands with their partners in public spaces. One lesbian respondent, previously based in Slough, recalled her astonishment with the 'in your face gayness' of Brighton, when she first visited the city with her parents to attend university open days. She decided to study there, came out to her parents soon after starting her studies and stayed in Brighton after graduation.

Which of the following options best describes how you think about your sexuality?

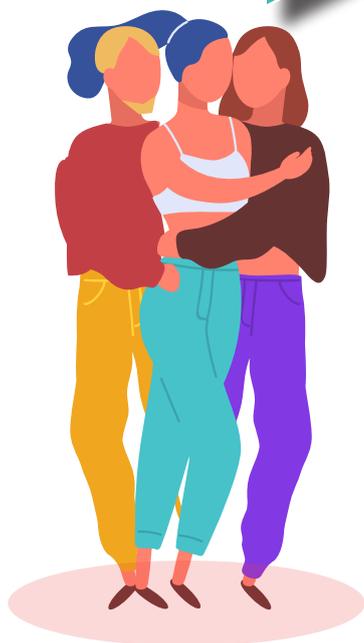
Answer	%	Count
Gay	49%	373
Lesbian	28%	215
Asexual	0.8%	6
Bisexual	16%	122
Heterosexual	1%	10
Queer	3%	20
Not listed, please specify	2%	17
Prefer not to say	0.5%	4
TOTAL	100%	767

As for my gender identity, it's changed and it's been still changing now, recently, since I moved here [to London]. At this point, I wouldn't say to anybody that I'm a man. I prefer the term queer, which is more loose. I feel it more. Though, I still think that I'm gay, even though... I'm a positive person. So that's my final answer.

Gay queer person between 25 and 29 years old in London

In the past, I didn't know how to deal with it that being bi [bisexual] can change my desire for people of different genders from day to day. I thought, 'Oh my god, I'm like nothing, neither hetero nor a dyke...' But after thinking about it for some time, it's OK for me now to say I'm bi or pan [pansexual]. I use both words because they mean more or less the same thing for me. [...] Unless somebody doesn't understand pansexual, then I don't bother and simply use bi. But I like pan more because it includes really all genders and highlights that there are more than two genders. I use it carefully though because I'm afraid that I'll come across as a Tumblr star who just made up a sexual orientation.

Pansexual woman between 18 and 24 years old in Yorkshire and the Humber



Coming out

Respondents tend to be most open about being LGBTQ to their friends in the UK (79% are open to all or most of them and 17% to some of them), followed by their friends in Poland (61% are open to all or most of them and 31% to some of them).

About 80% of respondents are out to all, most or some of their close family members (parents and/or siblings, if the respondents have any). The remaining one fifth declared that their close family members either do not know about them or respondents are unsure if they know about them. The majority of respondents are also out to all, most or some of their colleagues (86%) and fellow students (90%).

Respondents tend to be least open about being LGBTQ to the members of their extended families. One fourth of respondents stated that they are not out to their extended family members and further 10% that they do not know if the members know about them.

Moving to the UK, and sometimes within the UK (e.g. from Slough to Brighton), provided the opportunity for many interviewees to come out. It is not necessarily that they felt like they could not do it in Poland or Slough but the experience of changing place usually allowed the freedom of reinvention of themselves. One participant in his 20s came out to his parents and closest friends based in Poland only after moving to Birmingham but added that 'other people [in Poland] don't need to know'. He is openly gay to all his friends and colleagues in the UK.

Self-identified transgender respondents are more likely than cisgender respondents to be out to different groups of people (on average about 20 percentage points more). Gender-diverse respondents, in turn, are less likely than cisgender respondents to be out to different groups of people (on average about 10 percentage points less).

This is possibly related to the fact that transgender people tend to be more visible in society—that is, their difference tend to be more visibility marked in society—than gay men or lesbians. At the same time, gender-diverse people may be less open about themselves due to the notable lack of understanding of gender diversity in society at large, both in Poland and in the UK.

Asexual respondents are least open about their sexual identity to anyone mentioned in the survey and bisexual respondents are on average half less likely than lesbians and gay men to be out across different groups. This can be related to the general lack of understanding of asexuality as well as the dismissal of bisexuality in Polish and British societies at large.

Respondents who were 24 or younger in 2018 tend to be less open about being LGBTQ to all or most of their close and extended family members, colleagues as well as friends in Poland. At the same time, respondents younger than 30 years old are more likely than those being 30 years old or older to be open to all or most of their fellow students.

Do the following people know that you are an LGBTQ person? (excluding 'not applicable')

	All or most of them	Some of them	None of them	I don't know
Parents	66%	14%	16%	5%
Siblings	71%	9%	13%	7%
Extended family	27%	37%	27%	10%
Colleagues	60%	26%	10%	4%
Fellow students	48%	41%	8%	3%
Friends in Poland	61%	31%	6%	2%
Friends in the UK	79%	17%	3%	1%



I'm out. Completely out. I don't care what people think about me. I'm at this point of my life that I'm totally out. Everybody knows about me, I think. My friends, both hetero and not, colleagues... [...] My parents know about me too, though it is a taboo topic. We never discuss it. With my mum it's a bit easier but with my dad we never talk about it. I have an older brother and he surely knows about me but he's like my dad, absolutely no talk about it, strictly a taboo.

Lesbian woman in her 30s in South East England

No one from my family knows that I'm gay. I don't want them to know. My mum would get a heart attack... Or my father would get it. [...] At work [in a café], they say I'm gay, so I say OK, if you say so... They know about me but there are only four female colleagues at work. My two female flatmates also know that I'm gay but not the male flatmate [all flatmates are Polish].

Gay man in his 40s in East Midlands



Migration

The great majority of respondents (96%) moved to the UK in 2004 or later, that is, in the year when Poland joined the European Union or after it. Three per cent of respondents migrated to the UK between 2000 and 2003 and the remaining 1% in 1999 or before. The number of respondents coming to the UK between 2004 and 2011 was on average 30 respondents per year and it more than doubled later on with an average of 64 respondents per year between 2012 and 2018.

Respondents were asked to give a reason or reasons for migration in their own words as well as to indicate which reason was the main one for them, in case there was more than one. Reasons given by respondents were grouped into broader categories.

The most popular main reason for migration is related to work (31% of respondents). Other main reasons include accompanying or joining partners, families or friends (17%), and are related to LGBTQ issues (16%) or studying (10%). 19% of responses were coded as 'other' as they included many vague statements such as 'for better life', 'to change something in my life' and 'to change environment', along with some less commonly given reasons such as adventure, depression and family matters.

Apart from 125 respondents (16%) for whom LGBTQ issues were the main reason for migration, an additional 85 respondents (11%) mentioned LGBTQ issues as one of their reasons, albeit not the main one, for moving to

the UK. Therefore, in total, more than one in four respondents (210) declared that LGBTQ issues were either the main reason or one of the reasons for their migration. Gay men and lesbians are twice as likely as bisexuals to mention LGBTQ issues as one of the reasons for moving to the UK (32% of gay men and 29% of lesbians compared to 12% of bisexuals).

Respondents who mentioned LGBTQ issues as one of the reasons for migration most often contrasted the social, political and legal situation of LGBTQs in Poland and in the UK. While they characterised Poland by negative associations with 'homophobia', 'intolerance' and 'lack of acceptance', they attributed more positive associations to the UK, including 'openness', 'tolerance' and 'freedom'. Some of them also explained that they 'can live their own life' or that their life as an LGBTQ person is 'easy' and 'normal' in the UK. 34 respondents additionally pointed out that one of the reasons for migration was related to the fact that in the UK, unlike in Poland, they can legalise their same-sex relationships.

It is likely that these survey data underestimate the actual importance of LGBTQ issues as a reason for migration because out of 19% of responses coded as 'other', many could be potentially related to LGBTQ issues. Those include such answers as 'for better life', 'to change environment' and 'Poland is not for me', which are difficult to interpret without additional explanation by respondents.

Main reasons for migration for queer Poles in the UK

Answer	%	Count
Work-related	31%	235
Accompany/join	17%	128
LGBTQ-related	16%	125
Study-related	10%	79
Other	19%	145
Not valid or no response	7%	55
TOTAL	100%	767



I moved to Scotland in 2006. I couldn't stand the mentality [in Poland]. I had enough of struggling, both economically and socially. It was too much for me. [...] I couldn't afford anything to enjoy my youth. [...] I came back to Poland in December 2017 for private reasons. I wanted to break up with my wife. I came back home, I thought my life would now be better in Poland. Unfortunately, it didn't work out. We stayed there only a couple of months and came back to Scotland. Luckily, we also came back to each other.

Lesbian woman in her 40s in Scotland

I was a priest in Poland and Rome but Rome was a big disappointment for me with the world, with everything around me. And there was also my orientation, me being gay... Rome was a very important moment for me when I became open about it, when I decided to leave it all, move somewhere else and live openly as my true self, without masks, without hypocrisy. After Rome, I didn't see the point of going back to Poland because of the restrictions, current political climate and not much opportunities for young people in general. [...] So I decided to come to Northern Ireland because my brother was already living here.

Gay man between 18 and 24 years old in Northern Ireland



Brexit

Three quarters of respondents (76%) are against Brexit, including 60% strongly disapproving Brexit and 16% rather disapproving it. Only 4% of respondents support Brexit, while 12% partially approve and partially disapprove it. The remaining 9% have no opinion about Brexit.

In interviews, queer Poles in the UK shared their frustrations with the results of the Brexit referendum, worrying about how it would change their lives in the UK as Polish citizens or people of Polish origin rather than LGBTQs. Some interviewees discussed acts of xenophobia and hate speech that they encountered after the referendum, and expressed feelings of stress and uncertainty, explaining that they would apply for the British citizenship if they were eligible and/or have money to do so. Only one interviewee strongly supported Brexit. He is a gay man in his 50s who lives in North West England and has British citizenship, and who explained that the UK's independence from the European Union is more important for him than the potential repercussions of Brexit for Poles in the UK.

Many interviewees said that Brexit made them consider the possibility of leaving the UK. At the same time, they admitted that this is rather unlikely to happen because that would require too much of a change in their lives. Survey results confirm that for the majority of respondents Brexit is not considered as troubling enough to plan leaving the UK. Asked about their plans for the next five years, 75% of respondents answered that they intend to stay

in the UK, 10% plan to move to another country but not to Poland, and 7% plan to move to Poland. The remaining 8% of respondents are unsure about their future plans.

Respondents who plan to move to another country but not to Poland were asked to specify where they would like to go. The overwhelming majority listed Western countries with the top five choices being Spain (17 respondents), Germany (13 respondents), the Netherlands (13 respondents), Canada (9 respondents) and Sweden (6 respondents). All of those countries have a reputation of strong support for LGBTQs¹⁴. Only three respondents plan to move to an Eastern European country, two of them chose Czechia and one, Slovenia. In interviews, some participants who consider leaving the UK explicitly pointed out that it is important for them to live in an LGBTQ-friendly country. One of them started touring a number of European cities such as Berlin and Barcelona to find out what his life would look like in those places.

Brexit mixed up everything and I'm not sure how I feel about it. [...] It was very present on Facebook. I logged in and could see people's comments, and it hurt me. It hurt me because I came here to feel free and this freedom was taken away from me in a way. Europe tries to unite and England what? It was one of the most libertine places in Europe, which now suddenly becomes conservative. It hurts me a lot for different reasons. I think about my future. Do I really want to stay here if I'm not welcome?

Gay man in his 30s in London

What do you think about the UK leaving the European Union (so-called Brexit)?

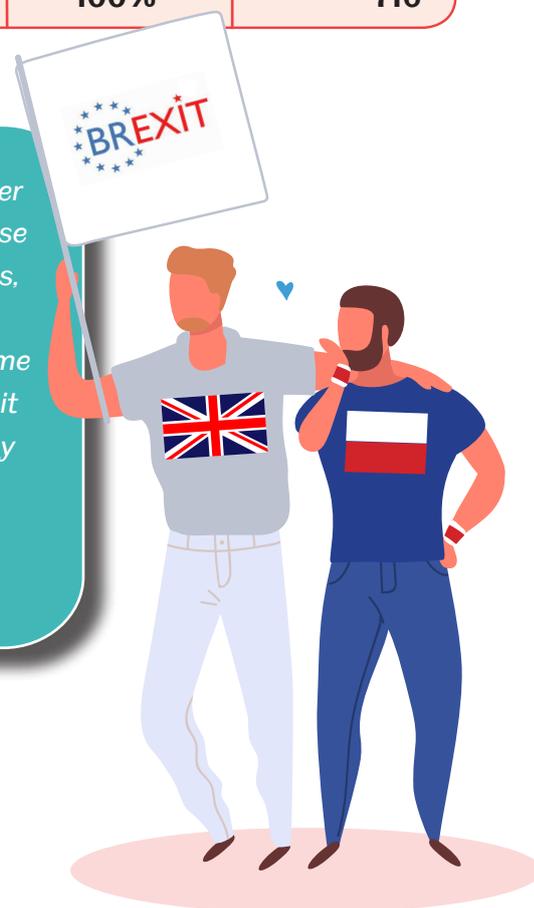
Answer	%	Count
I strongly approve Brexit	2%	13
I rather approve Brexit	2%	12
I partially approve and partially disapprove Brexit	12%	84
I rather disapprove Brexit	16%	115
I strongly disapprove Brexit	60%	429
I have no opinion about Brexit	9%	63
TOTAL	100%	716

What are your plans for the next five years?

Answer	%	Count
I want to stay in the UK	75%	539
I want to move to Poland	7%	53
I want to move to another country but not to Poland	10%	69
I don't know	8%	55
TOTAL	100%	716

I moved to the UK eight years ago, for a year... Eight years later and the year hasn't finished yet [laugh]. I think I stayed because of freedom. In Poland, the life is different. We all know how it is, we see it when we travel back for holidays. So I think that the freedom is the main reason why I would never come back home to live there. I can't imagine how I could live in Poland. I know it sounds horrible but I just can't imagine it... I'd love to bring my family here.

Lesbian woman between 25 and 29 years old in West Midlands



Social media

The overwhelming majority of respondents (97%) use Facebook at least once a week: 88% of them use it every day or almost every day and additional 9%, at least once a week. Instagram is the second most popular social media platform among respondents: 56% of them use it every day or almost every day and additional 14%, at least once a week. The third most popular social media platform is Snapchat with 20% of respondents using it on a daily basis and 13% on a weekly basis.

While Facebook is used extensively by different age groups of respondents, Instagram and Snapchat are particularly popular among young respondents. 88% of respondents between 12 and 24 years old use Instagram at least once a week, compared to 56% of respondents who were 25 or older. The difference is even larger for Snapchat. Respondents between 12 and 24 years old are more than five times more likely than older respondents to use Snapchat at least once a week.

Young respondents are also more likely to use Tumblr, which is considered as one of the most LGBTQ-friendly social media platforms¹⁵: 36% of respondents between 12 and 24 years old use Tumblr at least once a week, compared to the sample average of 26%. One of interviewees explained that they first went to Tumblr because they wanted to explore gender-diverse BDSM sex and they had come across an article in The Guardian about Tumblr as the place for alternative pornography. In December 2018 Tumblr banned adult content, which has negatively affected LGBTQ community¹⁶.

Regarding Polish social media, only two respondents use at least once a week nk.pl (or nasza klasa, meaning our class), which was once the largest social media platform in Poland with 11m users reported in Spring 2008¹⁷. One in five respondents use at least once a week the biggest Polish social media platform for LGBTQs, Queer.pl, and one in twenty use at least once a week the biggest Polish platform aimed at lesbian and bisexual women, Kobiety Kobietom (women for women). This shows that for many queer Poles in the UK, it is important to stay up to date with social, political and legal developments related to LGBTQ issues in Poland.

Facebook clearly plays an important role for respondents. Researchers point out that such a widespread use of this social media platform may create particular challenges for LGBTQs, especially LGBTQ migrants¹⁸, who may be out to some but not other groups of people. Three fifths of respondents (58%) declared that it is possible to figure out from their Facebook profiles that they are LGBTQs, while one fifth (20%) said it is impossible to do so. The remaining 22% answered 'I don't know' to this question. Additionally, 5% of respondents admitted that they have more than one account on Facebook and one third of those said it has something to do with the fact that they are LGBTQs.

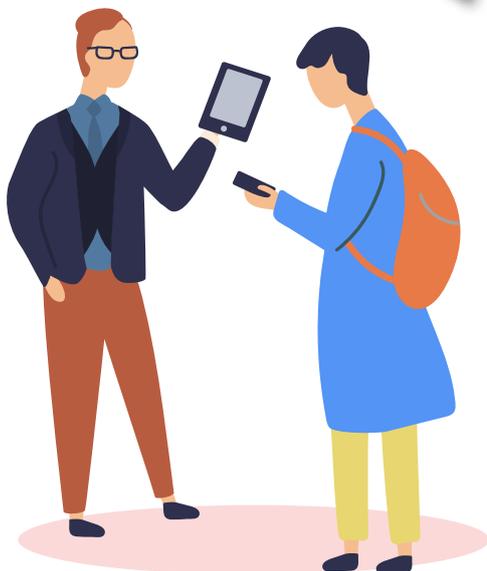
Use of social media platforms at least once a week

Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat	Tumblr	Twitter	nk.pl	Queer.pl	Kobiety Kobietom
97%	70%	33%	25%	20%	0.3%	22%	6%

Use of social media platforms at least once a week by age

Age	Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat	Tumblr	Twitter	nk.pl	Queer.pl	Kobiety Kobietom
12-17	91%	91%	91%	40%	30%	0%	3%	3%
18-24	99%	85%	60%	33%	25%	0%	29%	4%
25-29	98%	75%	33%	20%	11%	0%	24%	6%
30-34	96%	63%	18%	20%	16%	0%	21%	3%
35-39	96%	56%	6%	17%	18%	1%	18%	6%
40-44	98%	50%	2%	19%	24%	0%	19%	15%
45-49	91%	52%	10%	33%	24%	5%	24%	14%
50+	86%	43%	14%	29%	43%	0%	14%	14%

I have one 'old' Facebook profile with friends and family from Poland and one with friends from the UK. In the second one, I'm 'officially' gay and in the first one, I'm still in the closet.
Gay man in his 30s in Scotland



After coming out [as a trans woman], I put to death my previous [Facebook] profile. I created a new one, where I'm fully open about myself, no lies... [...] I deleted the profile out of anger... The past that it was preserving, I wanted to wipe it out. I was angry. [...] I don't regret it. All my friends who were there in my Facebook cloud, they all, literally all, came back.

Bisexual trans woman in her 30s in the East of England

Dating apps

Nearly half of respondents (46%) declared that they use dating apps¹⁹. Men and boys are twice as likely as women and girls to use dating apps (60% and 30%). The proportions are nearly identical for gay men (58%) and lesbians (32%). Additionally, 36% of bisexuals stated that they use dating apps. There are no major differences between different age groups in this respect.

Grindr is the most popular dating app among gay men in the sample: 70% of gay men who admitted using dating apps, use Grindr at least once a week. The second most popular dating app among gay men is Fellow.pl (31%), a popular gay dating app in Poland, followed by Tinder (24%). Additionally, one in six of gay men who use dating apps use PlanetRomeo and/or Scruff at least once a week.

The most popular dating app among lesbian respondents is Queer.pl: 50% of lesbians who use dating apps declared to use Queer.pl at least once a week. Other relatively popular dating apps among lesbians include Tinder (31%), Her (24%) and Kobiety Kobietom (14%).

The use of dating apps among bisexual respondents is more diversified, with the most popular apps being Grindr and Tinder (27% of those who use dating apps reported to use the apps at least once a week), followed by Queer.pl (16%), Her (16%) and Fellow.pl (13%).

These results point to the popularity of global players in dating apps industry such as Grindr, Tinder and Her among queer Poles in the UK. This gives the companies a unique power to

influence the way queers socialise with each other, for example through designing particular interfaces and setting particular terms of service, which may privilege the values of their creators such as more prudish nudity standards in the US compared to Europe²⁰.

At the same time, the results show that a significant number of respondents use Polish dating apps, which indicates the importance of staying in touch with other queer Poles in the UK and/or in Poland. This should be taken into account while designing outreach campaigns aimed at LGBTQs based in the UK, for example when promoting safer sex practices.

The majority of gay, lesbian and bisexual respondents who reported using dating apps, said they use them most often to talk to somebody online (64%), to find somebody for a date (56%), friendship (52%) and relationship (50%). One in fifth also declared that they use the apps to practice foreign language skills, presumably English, and only 2% stated that they use them to find a job or accommodation.

Gay men in my sample are twice as likely as bisexuals to use dating apps for arranging a sex date (62% and 28% respectively), while bisexuals are twice as likely as lesbians to use dating apps for the same reason (16%). One participant mentioned harsh body norms on the most popular gay dating apps, particularly Grindr, and said they prefer to use the apps which are more inclusive of big men such as BiggerCity, GROWLR and Scruff.

Use of dating apps at least once a week by sexual identity

Gay men

70%	Grindr
31%	Fellow.pl
24%	Tinder
16%	GayRomeo
16%	Scruff
11%	Hornet

Lesbians

50%	Queer.pl
31%	Tinder
24%	Her
14%	Kobiety Kobietom
7%	Badoo

Bisexuals

27%	Grindr
27%	Tinder
16%	Queer.pl
16%	Her
13%	Fellow.pl
5%	Badoo

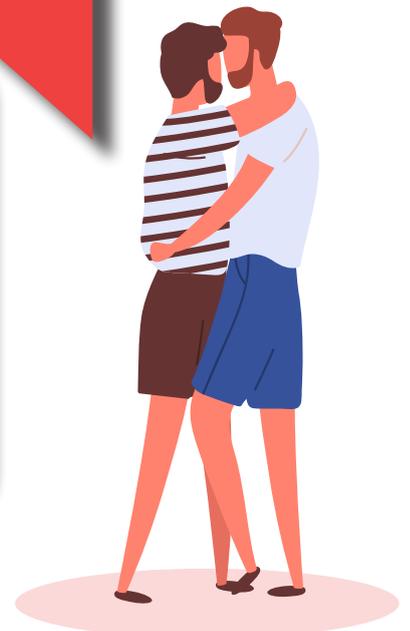


I have a profile on Fellow.pl in Polish and on Grindr in English. But I don't use Grindr a lot. [...] I don't mind going to bed with anybody, I mean with people of different nationalities. But I don't know why I prefer Polish guys for a relationship. I think it's related to language. [...] If I had an English boyfriend, or somebody else [who's not Polish], I wouldn't be able to fully share my passions and interests with him. I know I wouldn't be able to do it with him 100% because the language wouldn't allow it.

Gay man between 25 and 29 years old in East Midlands

When I was in Poland, I used Innastrona.pl [which later became Queer.pl] and Fille.pl. Fellow.pl was for men and Fille.pl was for women. [...] Fille was much smaller back then but it was easy to find somebody. Though, people had different 'interests' there, they mostly were looking for somebody for a threesome. And then Tinder turned up and I put in my profile there that I'm looking for girls only. Tinder was the most effective medium. When I moved to the UK, I only used Tinder all the time but I changed my options after a month or two stating that I'm interested in both genders.

Bisexual woman between 25 and 29 years old in North West England



Contribution

This research puts queer Poles in the UK at the centre rather than on the periphery of debates on identity, migration and social media. It has major implications for public, private and voluntary actors. These boil down to making visible the lives and experiences of queer Poles in the UK, recognising that not all migrants, not all Poles, are cisgender and heterosexual.

The challenges that queer Poles in the UK face are not entirely different from those of other queers or other Polish, or Central and Eastern European, migrants in the UK. However, some aspects of their lives and experiences are crucially different from those of the other groups and should be recognised as such to promote equality. Three examples illustrate this point:

First...

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates that the main reasons for migration to the UK among Central and Eastern Europeans are related to work (55%), accompany/join (29%) and study (9%)²¹. These results are not largely dissimilar from the survey results presented in this report, with respondents mentioning similar main reasons for migration (31% work, 17% accompany/join and 10% study). However, the experiences of queer Poles in the UK are hidden in ONS' statistics, as this survey reveals that for at least one in four respondents LGBTQ issues were one of the reasons for moving to the UK.

Second...

A recent article in The Guardian argues that many Polish migrants in the UK contemplate going back to Poland because of an increasing xenophobia in the UK in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, combined with the growing wages in Poland²². Participants in this research too expressed their overwhelming disapproval for Brexit (76% of survey respondents are against Brexit) and some of them mentioned in interviews the climate of increased xenophobia since the Brexit referendum. However, the Guardian article fails to recognise that for many queer Poles who plan to stay in the UK (75% of survey respondents), the reasons behind this decision include a perceived high level of freedom and acceptance of LGBTQs in the UK as well as the increased anti-LGBTQ climate in Poland after the 2015 parliamentary elections.

Third...

Drawing on the results of the National LGBT Survey, the Government Equalities Office published in July 2018 the LGBT Action Plan, which aims to support LGBTQs 'to reach their full potential'²³. The Plan discusses many actions related to health, education, safety, workplace and rights, which are undoubtedly also relevant to queer Poles in the UK. However, it will be difficult to support queer Poles in the UK to reach their full potential if the Plan fails to recognise particular challenges of this group, some of which have been pointed out in this report and include citizenship rights and English proficiency. Additionally, to reach one of the aims of the Plan, which is to improve online safety of LGBTQs, it is crucial to recognise that many queer Poles in the UK continue to use Polish social media and dating apps (22% of respondents use Queer.pl at least once a week).

Those examples show how crucial it is to recognise the diversity of both queers and migrants in the UK so to address the shared and unique challenges that queer Poles in the UK face in the current socio-political climate in Europe and in the age of digital culture.

Author

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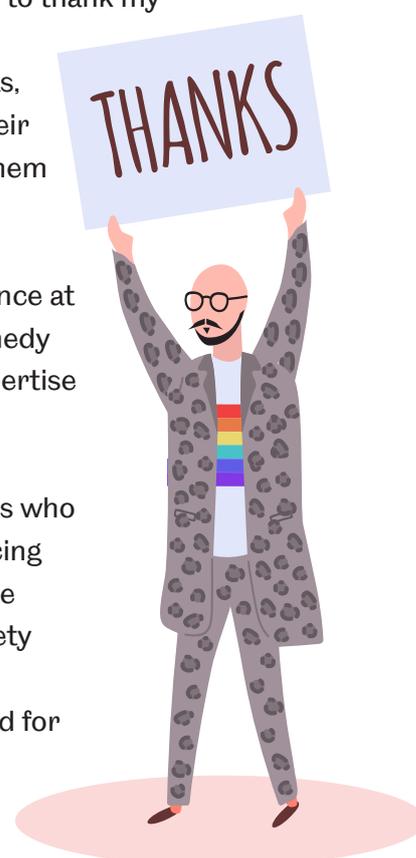
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