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# CULTUS

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2010, Volume 3

IDENTITY AND INTEGRATION

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## Negotiating LGBT identities in Italy: an intercultural perspective

*Franco Zappettini*

### *Abstract*

*This paper examines the role played by culture in the social construction and performance of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT)<sup>11</sup> identities in contemporary Italian society. Focusing on the debate surrounding the proposed introduction of a 'same-sex unions' Bill in 2008 and by looking at LGBTs as a (sub)cultural aggregate interacting with the Italian society at large, this study seeks to identify cultural factors that could possibly influence the integration process and that could be specifically ascribed to the Italian culture.*

*The research gathers both qualitative and quantitative data from different sources. A first source of data is represented by newspaper articles reporting the views of two high profile members of the Catholic Church at a crucial juncture of the political debate. Additionally data is retrieved from Internet forums where comments in relation to the debate were posted. Data is subsequently analysed with a phenomenological approach using an interpretive methodology informed by Hofstede's framework that relates acceptance of homosexuality to a country's masculinity/femininity dimension and to its religious views. In particular, discourse analysis is used to highlight how values are conveyed, concepts related and, more generally, how specific linguistic aspects are used to create 'social' meanings, sustain ideologies and support (or undermine) particular cultural messages.*

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<sup>11</sup> In this paper, the term LGBT is used in its meaning of an umbrella that encompasses self-ascribed 'non-heterosexual' identities and the related culture. Although not consistently agreed upon, LGB has been *de facto* used instead of 'homosexual' since the '90s with the later inclusion of Transgenders as individuals whose gender does not conform to conventional notions of 'male' or 'female' regardless of their sexual orientation. In some cases, LGBTQ has also been used where 'Q' stands for Queer or Questioning.

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*The findings suggest that the LGBTs quest for legitimization has been perceived (by a large part of Italian society) and portrayed (by the discourse in Italian media) as an attack on the institutions of marriage and family whose cultural significance in the Italian society can be usefully accounted for by the gender role division of the masculinity dimension (declined in its patriarchalist form). Finally, unlike most Western societies where acculturation ideologies have shifted from a marginalization of LGBTs towards their integration, Italian policies (or lack of them) have been instrumental in a radicalization and polarization of 'homophobic' and 'resistant' identities contributing to a separation of the two cultural aggregates.*

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### 1. Introduction

The last few decades have seen some landmark changes in the recognition of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) civil rights by an increasing number of Western States exemplified by anti discrimination bills and recognition of same-sex unions. Although the process has been far from linear, it nevertheless suggests a shift in the attitudes and perceptions of most Western societies towards LGBTs. Furthermore the EU and the Council of Europe have increasingly provided a transnational political framework that, through the Social Charter of Human Rights (2000), calls for a policy convergence in the direction of social inclusion and equality of LGBTs.

In spite of this, little has filtered down into the Italian legislative system and Italy remains one of the few European countries that have failed to produce any piece of legislation on the matter (ILGA, 2010). In 2006 a bill that would have granted LGBTs some civil and social rights was debated for some time in the Italian Parliament where it was strongly opposed by a number of MPs and eventually abandoned in 2008 following the dismissal of Prodi II Cabinet (*La Repubblica*, 27/2/2008)<sup>12</sup>. Since then, about thirty Italian homosexual couples have provocatively applied for a marriage certificate with their local register office, all to be turned down on the grounds of a legal interpretation of 'couple' and

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<sup>12</sup> The centre-left wing Prodi II Cabinet was in office from 17/5/2006 to 8/5/2008

‘marriage’ as incompatible with two same-sex persons. Their appeals were rejected as ‘unfounded’ by the Italian Constitutional Court, which indicated that it is a matter for the Italian Parliament to deal with it (that is to produce a law to allow same-sex unions) thus highlighting the legislative gap whilst reinforcing the vicious loop (*La Repubblica*, 14/4/2010). The debate on the social inclusion of LGBTs through legislative provisions has shown the polarisation of views in Italian society, with 50.6% of Italians considering homosexuality as “never justifiable” compared to 0.60% of Danes (World Values Survey, 2008).

Meanwhile, figures for homophobic attacks in Italy went from 75 (of which 9 were lethal) in 2008 to 123 (of which 12 were lethal) in 2009 (Arcigay, 2010). A proposed piece of legislation that should have made homophobic motivation a punishable “aggravating circumstance” to any attack failed to be passed in the Italian Parliament, attracting criticism from the UN (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 14/10/2009) and Amnesty International (9/10/2009). A 2009 report by European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (Cowi) suggests that Italy has “high rates of social and institutional homophobia”. ILGA’s 2010 Rainbow Index Report (that rates European countries based on laws and practices affecting LGBTs) placed Italy in the bottom league with 1 out of 10 marks (ILGA Europe, May, 2010).

## 1.1 Aims and objectives

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to identify reasons why the emergence of institutionally recognised LGBT identities in Italy is proving so problematic (in relation to other countries). The objectives are:

- To investigate cultural factors impacting on the construction of LGBT identities which may be specific to Italy;
- To examine the intercultural dynamics between the two cultural aggregates (that is the LGBT culture and Italian society at large) and to explore the difficulties in finding common ground;
- To analyse the social construction of LGBT identities in the public discourse in the Italian society.

By achieving these objectives, this paper would thus contribute to the intercultural academic literature bringing, in particular, insights on the role of cultural values in the construction of identities.

The first section of this paper provides the theoretical framework for the main themes that will be discussed. The second section defines the methodology criteria. The third section critically evaluates analyses and interprets data in the light of the theoretical frameworks. The final section provides some concluding remarks attempting to answer the questions originally formulated in the objectives.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Although some psychological literature has investigated and explained the construction of LGBT identities according to an essentialist model (that would see individuals externalising what is intrinsically specific to them (Troiden 1989), from a sociological and anthropological perspective, identity has been accounted for by different theoretical models that emphasise the social interaction between individuals and the role played by culture in providing them with a systematic tool of social adaptation (Hall 1990; Ferraro 1994; Castells 2010). Turner et al. (1987), for example, suggest that individuals are socially encouraged to ascribe themselves to categories which are perceived as relevant to them, thus creating in-groups and out-groups whose differences sustain identities, whilst being expected to 'behave' according to their gender identity (for instance boys are expected to be assertive and dominant and girls nurturing and passive).

Similarly, Halperin (1990: 42) supports a 'constructionist' rather than 'essentialist' view of sexual identity, emphasizing how "configurations of desire vary enormously from one culture to the next". This means that whilst recognizing a biological (or 'essentialist') dimension in the construction of sexual orientation, for Halperin socio-cultural factors would represent a more significative dimension. Herek (1986) also regards sexual orientation as culturally constructed to the extent that, in modern societies, "what one does" has become "what one is". However, there are many examples that seem to suggest the modern specificity of this construction (Blackwood 1984; Whitehead 1981; Herdt 1982) whilst, by contrast, physical and emotional attraction between individuals of the same sex in the past was never seen an exclusive source of social identity (Yee 2003). For Foucault (1978), it was the normalization of sexuality by

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governments (in particular with the introduction of ‘sodomy laws’ in the 19th century and the ‘heteronormative’ use of language) that was instrumental in creating sexual categorisation with the consequent labelling of non-normative groups.

Cultural subgroups (like LGBTs) are thus regarded as tending to exist within cultures although they are distinct from the dominant cultural groups as they provide members with relatively complete values and patterns of behaviour which are distinctive enough to support stand-alone subgroup identities, even if values may stem from the mainstream group’s hostility (Jandt 2004). The international movement that followed the Stonewall riots in 1969<sup>13</sup> saw in fact the emergence of a transnational LGBT (sub) culture that, in many cases, after the early ‘resistance’ and separation attitudes, has resulted in a gradual social inclusion of LGBTs reflected in most national policies. For example, a shift was generated in the public discourse from the ‘illness’ paradigm to that of civil recognition (exemplified by the removal of homosexuality from the Mental Disorders Manual by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973) in the wake of a ‘gay liberation’ campaign that called for a destigmatisation of “oppressed homosexuals”.

For Castells (2010) the recognition of civil rights has been primarily achieved through negotiation with and granted by the ‘dominant institutions’ in what he refers to as “identity legitimization”. Legitimizing actors “reproduce the identity that rationalises the sources of structural domination” (*ibid.*: 8) that is they are instrumental in the function and expansion of the ‘system’ in what Foucault (1978) sees as a ‘normalization’ of identities achieved through domination. Legitimizing identities would thus generate a ‘civil society’ by, on the one hand, contributing to the creation, extension and ‘hegemony’ of a “system of [state] apparatuses” and, on the other, embedding themselves into such institutions, thus “making it possible to seize the state without launching a direct, violent assault” (Castells 2010: 9).

Institutional legitimization through state policies can therefore represent a key indicator of the level of social acceptance of minority

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<sup>13</sup> The Stonewall riots taking place in New York in 1969 saw the residents of the Greenwich Village rising against the police to stop the systematic homophobic raids they had been subject to and, more generally, to end a governmental policy of persecution of sexual minorities. The ‘gay rights’ campaigning that immediately followed in other US and overseas cities is conventionally seen as the first step of an international LGBT movement as we know it today (Duberman, 1993).

groups like LGBTs as well as the ‘spaces’ allowed to subgroups to actively participate in the civic debate and their cultural values to be recognised. Laws affecting LGBTs can thus offer examples of how ideologies vary considerably across the globe suggesting that ‘assimilationist’ and ‘separatist’ approaches have emerged between LGBT and non-LGBT cultures equally sustained on both sides. In general, policies in Western societies focus on promoting equalisation and/or protection of LGBT groups while African and Middle Eastern countries focus on encouraging penalisation, with the rest of Asian countries assuming an official stance of denial or neutrality on the matter (ILGA 2010). The separatist ideology, however, has in some cases been advocated by the LGBT community itself; for instance, in the early ‘90s ‘Queer Theory’ activists rejected the identity politics approach to gay rights in what Castells (2010: 9) refers to as an example of “the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded”.

If policies are informed by ideologies, ideologies, in turn, may be regarded as reflecting values. For Hofstede (2005: 8, 21) values are the “core of culture” and ideologies are related to ‘desirable’ rather than ‘desired’ values. Norms, thus, pertain to what is desirable or “ethically right”. Hofstede (2001: 317) continues asserting that politicians are usually expected “to stand for certain values dear to citizens”. Similarly, Bourhis et al., (1997), in analysing policy approaches to immigration, identify a continuum of value-related attitudes (from ethnist to pluralist) that sustain different governmental approaches regulating the inclusion/exclusion of migrant ‘outside’ groups.

Hofstede (2005) correlates acceptance of homosexuality with the Masculinity index. The Masculinity dimension refers to the distribution of gender roles in a society. Societies with distinct gender roles (that is where “men are supposed to be assertive ... and women modest” (*ibid*: 120) are called ‘masculine’ whereas a society whose members have blending or overlapping roles (that is both genders are supposed to be modest and caring) is called ‘feminine’. Hofstede (1998) argues that a country’s attitudes towards sex practices (including homosexuality) will be a function of the masculinity index; in particular, masculinity “is negatively related to the acceptance of homosexuality” (*ibid*: 166). Masculine oriented countries, thus, will reject homosexuality because it is perceived “as a threat to masculine norms” whilst feminine oriented countries consider homosexuality as “a fact of life”. Moreover, for Hofstede the masculinity-femininity dimension is closely related to

religious attitudes. God in masculine cultures is ‘tough’, whilst in feminine cultures is ‘tender’ and this would justify similar individual behaviours toward fellow humans and their degree of acceptance of non-normative groups in the society. According to Hofstede (1998), Christianity has shown mixed tough and tender values, with Catholic countries showing a prevalence of masculine cultural orientation and Protestant countries traditions more feminine values. Hofstede (1998: 179) also holds that the masculinity index can represent a reliable predictor of a country’s degree of secularization. It is important, however, to make a distinction between ‘official’ and ‘actual’ secularisation. Countries like Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Scotland and England all support official state religions whilst Italy (among others) is officially secularised as the State dissociated from Catholicism as the state religion in 1948. Paradoxically, the vast majority of officially un-secularised States have all allowed for same-sex marriages or partnerships (with Denmark being the world’s first country to do so in 1989). Furthermore, in Sweden (where Lutheranism was the official religion until 2000), the Church of Sweden has become the first major faith organisation to conduct same-sex marriages since October 2009 (BBC News, 22/10/2009). On the other hand officially ‘secularised’ Romania, Russia, Turkey and Italy have been the countries with the strongest opposition to homosexuality (Eurobarometer 66, 2006).

Seroul (2009) offers further insights in tracing back the *pater familias* figure of Roman culture. One very important aspect of *pater familias* was his ‘virility’ conceptualized as his desire to conquer and to prevail in both the public domain (politics, demagoguery, by force of arms and laws) and in the private domain alike where he was regarded as “an absolute master with unlimited powers” including the imposition of his sexual will” (Cantarella, 1988:131). By contrast, his own subjection to other individuals was culturally seen as a cause of shame and dishonour whether it occurred in the battlefield or in homosexual intercourse (although it was accepted with slaves because they were considered part of the master’s property and as long as the slave remained the ‘passive recipient’ in the eyes of the public (Williams 1999). Seroul argues that as the Roman Empire came to an end, the Church took over the power from it acting as a sort of ‘bridge’ in its commitment to preserve the ‘traditional’ Roman values as these were gradually absorbed into new political institutions, with the *pater familias* now shaping itself into new figures whose patriarchal authority and dominance would still be

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traceable legacies. In this perspective, it would be plausible to recognize the Church's commitment to preserve the patriarchal arrangement of Roman society by making the institution of marriage a sacrament in 1215. As a legacy, for Catholicism (unlike Protestantism), the institution of marriage would thus become to represent a tangible symbol of God himself and, as such, "holier in masculine than in feminine countries" (Hofstede 1998: 159).

There are arguably very few concepts that are shaped by the specificity of culture more than marriage as, in fact, even its universality must not be taken for granted (Cia Hua 2008). Polygamy, polyandry, and endogamic practises have all, at some stages and in different societies, been culturally acceptable and indeed desirable (Scheidel 1996). Despite this variety of cultural significance, however, marriage has generally come, at least in modern societies, to culturally signify a legitimized commitment to a union that typically starts a family through procreation and involves regulation of the spouses' patrimonial and sexual lives (D'Andrade 1984). Historically, legitimization was initially provided by socially recognized public ceremonies; however, with the spread of Christianity, the validation role was soon taken over by the Church which, in Catholic countries remained the only authority entitled to officially ratify marriages.

It was only in 1929 with the ratification of the Lateran Pacts between the Italian State and the Catholic Church that civil marriage as a provision of its own (similar to what had been available in Protestant countries after the Reformation) became possible for the Italians. It is still customary though that, although they are two separate entities, both the religious and civil ceremonies take place at the same time, in virtue of an Italian legal provision ('matrimonio concordatario', Act 121/1985 amending Act 810/1929) that allows a religious authority such as a priest to act as a state officer in celebrating marriages, thus enabling a religious function to have civil effects.

## 2.1 Methodology

This paper reports on an interpretive study that makes use of both qualitative and quantitative data in a flexible, non-experimental and phenomenological oriented approach capable of illuminating cultural dynamics. It was felt that a phenomenological approach would fit



particularly well the function of investigating social constructs by providing useful insights into perceptions, meanings, attitudes and beliefs of the aggregates and individuals involved.

### 3. Document analysis

Italian newspaper articles were searched that could potentially provide insights on the national debate about same-sex unions. These tended to concentrate within a specific time frame (February 2007) coinciding with the date the Bill proposal called DI.CO.<sup>14</sup> had been approved by the Council of Ministers (8/2/2007) and was going to be discussed in the Parliament for final ratification.

For this analysis two articles were extracted and examined for their significance: an interview with Bishop Anfossi and one with theologian Velasio DePaolis published on *La Repubblica*, 12/2/2007 and *La Stampa*, 18/2/2007 respectively.

One first consideration is that, as the Bill was designed to recognise both heterosexual and homosexual cohabiting couples, the debate conflated two related but distinct arguments: one was the possibility for heterosexual couples to opt for a legal status alternative to marriage; the second was the first legal recognition of homosexual couples by the Italian state. Whilst the public discourse has generically referred to ‘coppie di fatto’ (de facto couples), specific recognition of LGBT couples was often referred to as ‘gay marriage’ in the media, although marriage as such was never an option that the Bill would have made available to LGBTs. This linguistic insight, however, is important because it reflects the scope of the ideological clash over the notion of marriage.

Currently, 9 countries worldwide have legal provisions allowing for same-sex couples to enter the same marriage contract that has always been available for heterosexual couples, with an increasing number of countries having recently introduced legal institutions that, under different names (civil unions or civil partnerships) and to different extents, allow same-sex couples to enter a legal contract comparable to heterosexual marriage (ILGA, 2010). Crucially, in some cases (the

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<sup>14</sup> DI.CO. (named after *Diritti e Doveri di Coabitazione* – ‘Cohabitation Rights and Duties’) would have introduced a status recognition to same-sex partners and derived a set of entitlements and obligations from it.

Netherlands, Norway, Sweden), provisions originally introduced as civil unions or partnerships were later on equalized with gender-neutral marriage. Interestingly these countries constitute the ‘backbone’ of feminine-oriented cultures, featuring in the bottom ranks of Hofstede (2005:121) Masculinity Index league.

In the article entitled “DICO: a Trojan horse for gay marriage”<sup>15</sup> (*La Stampa*, 18/2/2007) such possibility is strongly opposed by the Church in a pre-emptive expression of concern that “society will be de-Christianized” as “the values that it stands for (family and marriage) are being attacked”. In response to this threat, the Church feels a moral obligation to defend “the idea of family envisaged in the Italian Constitution ... that of the Christian anthropology”. LGBTs are perceived as “against” or at least incompatible with a certain notion of family and therefore excluded from it because their recognition would destabilize a pre-constituted order opening up unacceptable scenarios. For Bishop Anfossi (*La Repubblica*, 12/2/2007):

“The Church has always relied on the institution of marriage for its strong symbolic and ideal value...[the Bill] is not acceptable because it would upset a long-term established anthropological and cultural balance”.

To envisage what would happen if “the balance shifted” one would have to interpret the term “anthropological balance” according to the Christian theological view that marriage represents the legitimization of “two fleshes (bodies) that become one” (*ibidem*) to generate life thus justifying the use of sexuality finalized to procreation. Hofstede (2001) suggests that whilst there are two aspects to human sexuality (those of reproduction and pleasure), masculine Roman Catholicism rejected sex for pleasure “institutionalizing celibacy for priests, the cult of the Virgin Mary, and marriage as a sacrament with the purpose of procreation” (*ibid*: 329). In the absence of the procreation element (at least in a traditional sense) in homosexual relationships, their use of sexuality cannot be publicly recognized but, indeed represents a "weak and deviant" practice (as Pope Benedict XVI defined it) that makes LGBTs anthropologically lower and socially destabilizing (Seroul 2009). One therefore could look at the argument that the Church’s opposition to a

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<sup>15</sup> Original title: “Dico, cavalli di Troia per arrivare ai matrimoni gay”. Personal translation.

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Bill granting LGBTs access to a legal recognition (that could potentially redefine the established notion of marriage) would “shift the balance” of civil society towards a more inclusive notion of non-conforming identities. In the wake of this, the fear that recognizing LGBT unions “would break the family apart” (Anfossi, *La Repubblica* 12/2/2007) suggests that the ‘shift’ (and related perceived ‘attacks’) could, in fact, affect the Church’s legitimacy to power. This institution, like most hierarchical systems, has relied on its members’ compliance with ‘moral rules’ and high power distance for a structured, reliable, and predictable functioning. As Hofstede (2001: 147) suggests, rules represent a strategy of uncertainty avoidance which, in turn, would be the main rationale for world’s religions. For Hofstede (2001: 329) humans have sought religious traditions (and adhered to rules) as a source of certainties in the face of the “unpredictable risks of human existence”. This theme is clearly evident in Anfossi’s (2010) comment: “The role of the church is providing certainties in the face of sentimental uncertainties that young people are encountering nowadays.” At the same time acceptance of rules (based on alleged ‘natural’ or ‘divine’ sources) has sustained the power entitlement of authorities and power relations.

Another concern expressed by Bishop Anfossi (*ibidem*) is that “There is a risk that global culture shifts its axis from a principle of collective responsibility in favour of a concept of total and absolute individual freedom”. The important message that is inferable from this is the ideological opposition to individualism. Hofstede (2001: 209) refers to the individualism/collectivism polarization to define whether values are shaped around the self or the group. This view would have particular relevance to family arrangements and family dynamics, since, as Hofstede argues, in individualist societies everyone is expected to have a high degree of independence and rather loose ‘clan’ ties whereas, in collectivist ones, individuals are part of much more cohesive in-groups (usually extended families) to which they are bonded by mutual assistance and loyalty expectations. Hofstede correlates low levels of individualism with high levels of power distance and masculinity; however Italy does not seem to fit this pattern as it shows high scores in all domains. Instead, the patriarchalist paradigm perhaps should be looked at to interpret the Italian data.

Patriarchalist societies are characterized by the rooting of “the institutionally enforced authority of males over females and their children in the family unit” and by the influence of such cultural set up

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in every aspect of life from interpersonal relationships to politics (Castells 2010:192-193). The patriarchal paradigm has also strongly shaped the Catholic Church since its origins. Crucially, the Church came to be structured as a patriarchal institution through a male-dominated hierarchical system that nevertheless has strongly fostered and relied on the cult of the family (North 1995). On a social level, for most European societies, patriarchalism has represented a cohesive model of family organisation until the occurrence and intensification of patterns of industrialization and globalization typically described as modernization (Giddens 1992). Social shifts resulting in adjustments in the family arrangements have, in most cases, caused a weakening of the patriarchal system (Castell, 2010:193). In particular, the female condition has emerged empowered as ‘breadwinner’ and, more importantly, in control of the reproduction process. As a consequence, Giddens (1992: 154-5) suggests that one aspect of modern society has been an increasing dissociation of sexuality from marriages. This shift would appear to have affected most Western countries with Northern European societies showing a “wide ranging diffusion of informal unions and extramarital births” (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004:150).

However, in recent years, Southern European countries, and Italy above all, have shown very different patterns. Whilst the period between 1991 and 2008 has seen an overall decreasing trend in the number of marriages celebrated in Italy (ISTAT 2008), ‘marriage’ as an institution is still regarded as the event that officially sanctions leaving the parental home (Rosina & Fraboni 2004). Rosina & Fraboni (2004:154) suggest that cohabitation and arrangements alternative to marriage are scarcely attempted not because of moral prescriptions against it but fundamentally because of “the strong ties between parents and children that are anthropologically rooted in the Italian society”. Marriage would thus become loaded with significance out of necessity, almost like an inescapable rite of passage. Whilst this is not necessarily the case with all layers of the Italian population (for instance, cohabitation is widespread in large urban areas in the North) and DeBeer et al. (2000:115) believe that Italy is only a late-comer in what is a “European common transition process”. This attitudinal difference could well account for the demographic and cultural gap between Italy and Northern European countries.

The implications of this argument would thus point to a greater consideration of the social construction of marriage in Italian culture,

where such institution takes on the specific cultural meaning of a ‘necessary’ rite of passage that retains a deeper significance for the Italian society than its Northern European neighbours.

### 3.1 Comments posted on internet forums

This section analyses a list of comments posted on YouTube<sup>16</sup> and OneTivu.it<sup>17</sup> in relation to the television programme *Domenica 5*<sup>18</sup> during which a live debate was held on the subject of the recognition of gay couples. These forums were selected because it was felt they could integrate the newspaper article analysis with more informal and discursive data.

In general, it was possible to broadly identify the discursive tones of comments posted by either side on a range from ‘soft’ to ‘hard’. At one end, comments with ‘hard’ tones tended to convey more polarised opinions more directly, with more frequent verbal abuse, offensive language and derogatory terms. Furthermore a higher frequency of discourse construction in terms of ‘you’ and ‘us’ suggests an ideological in/out group division and a greater discursive tension. At the other end of the spectrum, ‘soft’ tones were characterised by a language mediated by pragmatic strategies that suggest non-confrontational approaches. The majority of postings on YouTube were characterised by ‘hard’ discursive tones (even more so considering that some postings were removed by the moderator as deemed ‘not appropriate’) whilst most comments on OneTivu.it, on the other end, seemed to contain ‘softer’ tones.

One recurrent idea in both forums was the natural/unnatural view of homosexuality that would determine the ‘eligibility’ of LGBTs to aspire to some sort of recognition. For some, the ‘non-conventional’ use of sexuality by LGBTs is incompatible with certain religious positions and it would therefore justify a rejection of LGBTs calls for legitimization reaffirming, at the same time, a conceptualization of family in an exclusively patriarchal sense. As one commentator put it [personal translation]:

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<sup>16</sup> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fn11PgIeCEM>)

<sup>17</sup> (<http://www.onetivu.it/20/10/2009/rissa-sullomosessualita-a-domenica-cinque/>)

<sup>18</sup> Broadcast on Canale5 on 17/10/2009

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A family is about two people growing into a new human being, which cannot happen with you...a gay couple cannot produce a tangible fruit of their love, but only personal and reciprocal pleasure ... God created man and woman to be together and a family will always be a father, a mother and their children and he who calls himself a good Catholic and goes to church every Sunday cannot possibly accept certain demands [made by LGBTs].

Interestingly, another theme emerges in the document that would point to an alternative or additional reason for opposing LGBT couples. In support of one commentator who wrote: “if you’re gay there’s no need to flag it up, just live your life ...” another commentator posted the following:

Let me just make it clear that I won’t tolerate this ostentation and your demand for same rights as heterosexual couples. Yes, homosexuality may well have always existed but it seems to me that lately you [LGBTs] have become very complacent and ostentatious. Such transgression is going to f\*\*k up the world’s morality. I WON’T HAVE IT!<sup>19</sup> [capital letters used in the original].

This comment seems to encapsulate well the idea so deeply rooted in one part of the Italian society that homosexual behaviour will be tolerated as long as there is no obvious mention or representation of it, as this would be a cause of scandal, reminiscent of the *pater familias* expectations of virility. At institutional level, this attitude has meant that, historically, homosexuality has been negated rather than repressed by the Italian State, because the repressive function has always been delegated to the ‘moral’ teaching performed by the Catholic Church (De Beaufort et al, 2008). The supposed separation of powers that the Lateran Pacts was aiming to introduce, has possibly only exacerbated the impasse exposing the difficulty (or unwillingness) of the Italian State to adopt ‘LGBT friendly’ policies as this would indicate a radical change of direction from Catholic to secular values.

On the contrary, the perception of LGBTs as non-conformist identities that could potentially undermine the rules or implicit ‘moral’ prescriptions on which the Italian social system is founded has, in some cases, over spilt into openly homophobic attitudes (exemplified by the surge in homophobic attacks). This view would be consistent with Castells’ analysis that homophobia has been the response of certain patriarchal societies in the wake of the perceived threat brought about

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<sup>19</sup> In the language of Internet forums writing in capital letters indicates shouting.

upon them by non-conformist identities and non-traditional family arrangements. For Castells (2010) the diversification of family arrangements experienced by modern society (including same-sex couples but also a dissociation of the reproduction function from the upbringing function through IVF techniques) has inevitably changed the ‘power system’ of patriarchy which has been traditionally based on “taboos, sexual repression and compulsory heterosexuality” (*ibid*: 216). Consequently, this destabilization, whilst allowing for new and more varied identities, has resulted in some cases in forms of “fundamentalist restoration” (*ibid*: 301) with clear homophobic tones, as exemplified by one of the comments posted on the *You Tube* forum:

[Various derogatory and homophobic terms] What tolerance? [swearword] you’re worth fewer rights than slaves! I enjoy insulting you in the street! Am I a homophobic? Well, then I’ll be a homophobic forever.

Radicalized positions are equally found among LGBTs which in Castells’ (2010) framework would suggest the construction of *resistance identities*: For Castells (2010: 9), resistance emerges as a viable alternative to the ‘oppressing’ conditions that ‘dominant’ society has imposed on LGBT individuals through their systematic alienation, stigmatization and devaluation. This would lead to separation and rejection of the ‘other’ culture. The ‘resistance’ paradigm that underpinned the early ‘gay liberation’ movement would thus appear to be still present in the Italian LGBT culture as exemplified by the comment:

We [LGBTs] have no rights ...we have nothing. All we have is never-ending homophobia, what kind of life are we supposed to conduct? We’ll carry on fighting our war until people wake up.

Furthermore, in terms of language, a number of postings suggest that the LGBT resistance is expressed to ‘match’ homophobic comments in the same use of derogatory and aggressive tones, this time, typically aimed at the State and the Church:

[Italy] is a sh\*\*\*y medieval country, not a democracy... I’ve had enough of you all f\*\*\*\*\*g God fanatics! F\*\*k off!

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#### 4. Conclusions

This study started out as a quest to shed a light on the social identities of LGBTs in the Italian society and to gain a better knowledge of their construction and performance from the advantage point of a specific case framed in the legislative context of legitimizing same-sex unions. The crucial role of culture was highlighted in the notion that identities rely on dynamics involving social interaction and cultural negotiation.

The findings proceeding from the analysis would suggest that the overall acceptance of homosexuality in the Italian society is comparatively low, in line with Hofstede's (1998) predictors that would correlate acceptance of homosexuality with one country's religious views and its masculinity index.

However, the role of religion seems to go beyond the sanction of moral conduct guidelines, as the analysis has suggested that religion has taken on a major cohesive cultural role in the Italian society through the preservation of traditions embodied in certain 'rites of passages'. This would be consistent with the direction of causality from values to religion argued by Hofstede. The religious discourse of condemnation of LGBTs based on their 'unnatural' and 'non-procreative' behaviour could be interpreted as the Catholic Church's rejection of non-conforming identities that are seen as undermining a hierarchical system relying on adherence to rules and norms to guarantee the 'uncertainty avoidance' function that Hofstede (2001) sees as the rationale for all religions. Furthermore, along with the religious explanation, patriarchy was crucially highlighted as a framework to make sense of the specificity of the Italian case, arguing that, for part of the Italian society, allowing the legitimization of LGBTs has been interpreted as an attack on the patriarchal family arrangement, a long standing social system validated by the Church through the institution of marriage which has come to assume for Italians the meaning of a 'necessary' rite of passage.

In the wake of this, the difficulties faced by LGBT couples in the debate over their legal recognition were multiple but can be conveniently summed up into two major arguments. The first argument is that the quest for legitimization (shared with heterosexual couples) through any form outside the traditional institution of marriage has been perceived (and portrayed) as an attack on marriage itself by a significant part of the Italian population which share the notion of marriage as invested with certain cultural values. These values would appear underpinned mainly



by religious values; however, as discussed, the cultural and anthropological components play fundamental roles in making marriage a much more significant construct for the Italian society than most other Western societies. The second argument is represented by a straightforward opposition to homosexuality with strong evidence of religious views being directly related to negative attitudes. However, also in this case, we have been able to trace the rationale for such views in the specificity of Italian cultural values, hypothesizing the difficulty for LGBTs to emerge as non-conformist identities against the backdrop of a patriarchal society. On an institutional level the historical attitude of the Italian legislation to negate rather than repress homosexuality has been highlighted. This has effectively contributed to delegating the repressive function to the Church. As this status quo of tolerance was achieved at the expense of the visibility of LGBTs, when recently faced with pressure from the European institutions, the Italian state's attitude of denial has become increasingly unsustainable exposing the gap with other Western countries where the transition of LGBTs from 'resistance identities' to 'legitimizing identities' has occurred comparatively painlessly; and acculturation dynamics have, by and large, followed a parallel pattern moving from separatist and marginalizing ideologies to more integrative ones reflected in specific legal provisions.

By contrast, in the Italian society, the shift towards the social inclusion of LGBTs has proved more difficult than other countries and it has resulted in an ideological clash over 'core' cultural values with various implications. On the one hand, legitimization denied by the Italian state has been sought through other institutions that have appeared more willing to provide such validation, such as the European Union (although this path might prove more time-consuming and uncertain). On the other hand, the debate seems to have exposed the exacerbation and radicalization of ideologies on both sides with certain homophobic and LGBT resistance positions clearly emerging from some of the documents analysed, suggesting that separation is still very much the favourite solution for a certain part of the Italian society.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the findings may contribute to understanding and explaining the phenomenon of social integration of LGBTs in the Italian society. However, it is also felt that this research carries some limitations, primarily related to the interpretive nature of the analysis and the specificity of the case studied; so it cannot claim a generalization of the findings and it does not lend itself to replication.

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For this reason, it is felt that more exploration could be undertaken and further research is encouraged that, in particular from an intercultural perspective, would possibly look at related issues, outside the scope of this research, capable of promoting a more comprehensive understanding.

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