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Communication for Inclusion in Universities: Study of the Perception of LGBTQI+ Actions at the Complutense University of Madrid

Eva Citlali Martínez Estrella [α], Ainhoa García Rivero [σ], Belén Moreno Albarracín [ρ] & Daniel Ramos Morales [ω]

I. Introduction

Universities are meant to be places of personal and intellectual development. In theory, they are designed to be a safe place where students can express themselves without fear. However, certain vulnerable groups continue to struggle to be able to assert their identities. There are five principal categories of social inequality, which are socio-economic and urban-rural, gender, ethnic and racial, disability, and age (Gairín & Suárez, 2012). There are groups at risks of exclusion in a society still dominated by prejudices and stereotypes in each category. Among these groups is the LGBTQI+ community since people who do not follow sexual and gender norms tend to be punished with bullying and hidden curricula in school environments (Elipe et al., 2015).

The existence of social inequality in these areas creates barriers that make it difficult for vulnerable groups to integrate into social contexts, such as academia (Pichardo & Puche, 2019). There are physical barriers, like non-accessibility in common spaces, bureaucratic barriers with the absence of clear and known protocols, and symbolic barriers due to a shortage of positive references or models. In addition, many university students, mainly first-year students, are in unknown surroundings. The change of residence and the independence from their family nucleus creates a new opportunity to weave social networks and to construct one's sexual and gender identities (Gairín, 2014). The barriers found at the university can frustrate one's affective identification.

It is necessary to mention that options for these groups to be educated are reduced since some academic areas are perceived to be friendlier and safer than others. Thus, limitations are imposed for the development of curricular and professional activities (Chamberland et al., 2013). For example, studies have shown (Puche, 2018) that there is a frequent tendency for transsexual boys and girls to drop out of school before university because of the violence they have suffered in the scholastic environment.

Public policies are being developed to alleviate these inequalities. Law 3/2016, of July 22, on the protection against LGBT-phobia and non-discrimination based on sexual orientation and identity in the Community of Madrid dedicates Article 33 to universities. In it, principles of non-discrimination as well as respect for sexual orientation, gender identity, and their expression are applied to universities. In addition, the implementation of protection, support, and research measures for the visibility of the LGBTQI+ community are encouraged as well as the emergence of associations on university campuses who are dedicated to the cause. Also, it is a protected right for Madrid universities to have a figure that watches over this community and assists them in situations of discrimination.

This study focuses on the Complutense University of Madrid (CUM) because of its connection with the authors. If theory is contrasted with practice, CUM has protocols in accordance with current legislation. This predominantly takes place through two actions. Due to strongly rooted prejudices against homosexuality, transsexuality, intersexuality, and bisexuality, there is the Equality Plan (CUM, 2015). One of the missions of the plan is to ensure respect, freedom, and equality of all members of the university, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Also, there is the Office of Sexual Diversity and Gender Identity (CUM, 2022), which focuses on care and accompaniment, training, visibility, support for research, networking and the dissemination of materials and other resources related to the LGBTQI+ community.

However, in terms of training, there is a scarcity of classes that address sexual diversity and identity, despite the fact that CUM is one of the first Spanish universities to implement a master's degree in LGBTQI+ Studies. Considering the allusion to research made by both Law 3/2016, of July 22, and the CUM Equality Plan, it is useful to highlight the scarcity of research on constraints this community experiences when choosing a degree and experiencing university life (Pichardo & Puche, 2019). Therefore, this study is presented as an opportunity to contribute to achieving a solid theoretical base.

Attention to the vulnerability of the LGBTQI+ community presents a challenge for the promotion of inclusive universities. This study is based on two challenges supported by previous literature (Lorenzo et al., 2014) transcending the belief that inclusion is only about access and promoting the visibility of inequality

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by means of strengthening institutional communication channels. The main questions of this study are: What actions does CUM take and promote to motivate the inclusion and integration of the LGBTQI+ community? What does this community think of the implemented strategy? The main objective of the study is to analyze how CUM uses their communication channels to attain diversity based on tolerance and to study the LGBTQI+ community's perspective of visibility, notoriety, and the perception of those actions.

II. Research Design

A case study was used to address the research objective because it facilitates understanding the global perspective by considering all angles (Ugalde & Balbastre, 2013). For its development, a mixed methodology is used in which instruments of quantitative and qualitative analyses are combined (Anguera et al., 2018). Among the advantages of these types of methodologies, the ease of generating and verifying theories is highlighted, as well as the possibility of obtaining stronger inferences (Molina, 2020).

Thus, a complete perspective can be obtained on CUM's action protocol concerning the LGBTQI+ community, including the perception of the group at the university. It should also be noted that the scope of the study is an in-depth descriptive-interpretive analysis (Burke & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

First, from the issuer's approach, a content analysis is conducted to classify the communicative actions aimed at the visibility of the LGTBIQ+ community implemented by the CUM in social networks. In this regard, the study focuses on its main institutional profile (Unicomplutense) and that of the Office of Sexual Diversity and Gender Identity (diUCM), which are active on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. To what extent does the LGBTQI+ community have a place in the social media strategy of the institution? What type of actions are implemented to make the community visible? An attempt to answer these questions was made by analyzing three publication time intervals conducted during the Pride week 2022 campaign: pre (3 days before it began), during (from July 1- 10, 2022), and post (3 days after it concluded). This period is delimited because it is considered a key timeframe for institutional and social recognition of the LGBTQI+ community, considering this is when the greatest volume of content should be published on the subject. To compile the data, a table analysis is designed in which semiotic variables derived from the functionalities of the social media platforms are included, like format, discursive intention, and the type of transmitted messages (Bonilla et al., 2019).

The survey is to collect data on the perceptions of the respondent concerning the university community. The main advantage of the survey is the possibility of comparing the precision of the results with a high cost/efficiency index (Lopez, 1998). In addition, this conventional technique transcends the offline scenario thanks to technological advances. For the development of the project, a self-administered form was designed (Malegarie & Fernández, 2019) and was hosted on a specialized web application that was distributed through the official channels of CUM, which are the social networks of the university itself and the Student Observatory Department. The questions in the survey are both open and closed. The first questions allow the students to approach their feelings with the freedom of expression. The other questions are codified to obtain quantitative parameters. For the interpretation of the results, descriptive statistics have been applied through frequencies and the analysis of independent variables of the Chi-square test. As a result, it is possible to contrast if the association between the variables should be rejected or not. The following formula was used for calculation:

$$X^2 = \sum \frac{(fo_i - fe_i)^2}{fe_i}$$

To interpret the results, it is necessary to consider if a typified remainder outside the rank ± 1 is synonymous of atypical frequency. Therefore:

a) *Typified remainder inferior to -1.2:* In the cell that corresponds to this remainder, a significantly inferior independent frequency to the expected one appears. Therefore, disassociation is exhibited in the modalities of the variables.

b) *Typified remainder superior to 1.2:* In the cell that corresponds to this remainder, a significantly superior independent frequency to the expected one appears. Therefore, association is exhibited in the modalities of the variables.

Thirdly, to complement the data on the execution and perception of the communicative actions by the university community, in-depth interviews are conducted with members of the CUM directly linked to the LGTBIQ+ collective, combining in this case the perspective of the sender with that of the receiver. This allows for research on the protocol of both online and offline actions developed by the university in order to have a deeper understanding of the points that require social intervention by the institution (Guzmán et al., 2013). Interviews were scheduled with eleven inclusion coordinators as well as professors of the CUM that were chosen by their faculties in order to act as representatives of the Diversity and Inclusion Unit, along with eight students who identify themselves as LGBTQI+. The information was collected with a qualitative approach using Atlas.ti and SPSS software to process three main variables: coincidences regarding problems detected, proposed solutions, and perceptions for the formulation of a communication guide for inclusion at CUM.

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III. Results

a) Social Media Content Analysis

From the perspective of the surveyor, the study reports few results due to the small amount of space dedicated to the transmission of information concerning the LGBTQI+ community in CUM's social media profiles. During Pride week and the days before and after, only three posts were made on Twitter, one on Instagram, and none on LinkedIn, despite the fact that the study covers the activity of two different institutional accounts: the general account of the Complutense University of Madrid and the account managed by the Diversity and Inclusion Unit.

On Twitter and Instagram, the institution uses the same format and prioritizes text over visual content. Although text has a place in all publications, it should never be the only protagonist and it should always be accompanied by links to external sources or videos. The university transmits messages about Pride using a friendly and open conversational style, reflecting institutional respect for the LGBTQI+ community. By implementing these actions, the CUM's main intention for institutional positioning is to appear to the public as being a university that is committed to and proud of the sexual diversity and identities of its campus. This is shown in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1: Tweet from @diUCM during Pride

Twitter is used as a channel to share informative content about the LGBTQI+ community and in one article called "The Conversation", the experience of the LGBTQI+ teaching staff is shared. In addition, the Jaume I University is tagged, which is where the publication was originally shared. In this way, CUM is conveying the idea of institutional collaboration around the social issue in question through a message based on life experiences.



Figure 2: Instagram post from @uni.complutenseon during Pride

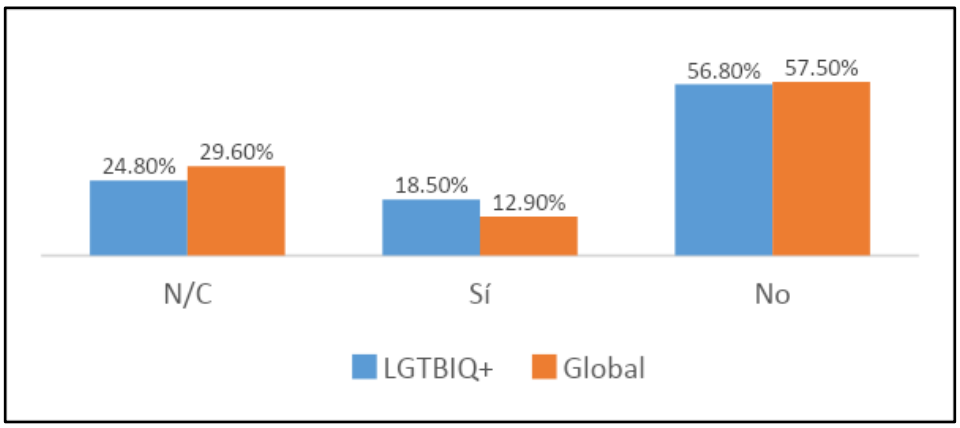
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Instagram is used to visualize institutional facilities at CUM that are committed to the event, such as the student residence facilities shown in Figure 2. The publication can be interpreted as promoting social responsibility, especially considering the specific text and inclusion of supportive hashtags.

b) Surveys: The CUM Community Weighs In

In the survey there was an initial sample base of 7,731 people. Of them, 98% (n=7574) belong to CUM, although only 28% (n=2168) are declared members of the LGBTQI+ community. It should be noted that, in general, this community is remarkably satisfied with the communicative actions for diversity implemented by the institution, most of them giving a score of between 7 and 8 out of 10.

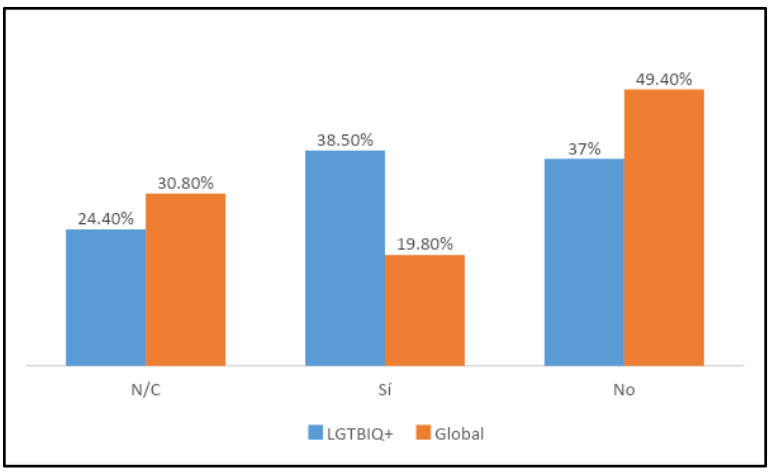
However, nearly the same number of members of the LGBTQI+ community as the rest of the university are unaware of the existence of CUM services that specialize in attention for the LGBTQI+ community, as seen in Graph 1. Focusing attention on the affected people who responded (n=400), it is significant that only 83 knew of the Unit for Sexual Diversity and Gender Identity at the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, which provides support for the facilitation of gender and name changes in bureaucratic procedures and mediation in cases of homophobic violence, among other functions.



Graph 1: Awareness of the existence of LGBTQI+ services

The university community as a whole identifies streets, public places, and social media as being scenarios of violence against the LGBTQI+ community. Although CUM has safe and equitable surroundings in which it treats everyone the same regardless of one's sexual orientation or identification, as well as a teaching staff that is inclusive and nonviolent, the community thinks that the institution has adopted a neutral position in its communication channels by showing respect towards the group with little commitment to it. The consistency of this sentiment with the extracted results of the CUM social media profiles content analysis is significant.

19.8% of the university community believes that a heterosexual focus predominates the content strategy on social media. If the perception of the LGBTQI+ community is singled out, this sentiment is even stronger, as seen in Graph 2. This sentiment is mainly due to the use of language and images published by the institution.



Graph 2: CUM community opinion on a heterosexual communication model

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The passivity alluded to before is also associated with where someone would go in the event of homophobic aggression on campus. There exists a different perception between the LGBTQI+ community and the rest of CUM. The LGBTQI+ community said they would go to the police station or to an organization first while the rest of the university community would look for aid in the deanship of their faculty. Therefore, there is a greater sense of university protection in the heterosexual sector. This fact acquires greater relevance for the study when observing that 22.8% of the LGBTQI+ community has suffered or witnessed homophobic aggression in university facilities. 36% say they would not make a formal complaint if they experienced or witnessed this aggression for fear of retaliation. Likewise, using a statistical analysis of Chi-square contrasts for the determination of independence in two-dimensional samples, also known as Pearson's χ^2 test, and a non-parametric analysis with categorized residuals, an association between the two study variables of identifying as LGBTQI+ and having suffered or witnessed homophobic violence are demonstrated. This is reflected in Table 1, where the value of P is <0.05.

Table 1: Chi-square tests

	VALUE	gl	Asymptotic sig. (2-sided)
Pearson's Chi-Square	302.219a	4	,000
Reason for Probability	277,840	4	,000
Linear by Linear Association	143,555	1	,000
N of Valid Cases	7,574		

c) Interviews for a Dual Perspective

To combine a single methodological tool for the focus of the interviewer and interviewee, eight of the interviews were with CUM students and eleven were with coordinators from the inclusion units, for a total of 19 interviews. Their responses made it possible to identify the primary needs and problems faced by the LGBTQI+ community. In addition, they themselves proposed a series of solutions to meet the institutional challenges concerning this matter.

Both the students and the coordinators agree that the main challenge that the community faces is discrimination, as shown in Figure 3. Not enough resources are dedicated to making diversity visible. This is shown in both the discursive exclusion of the LGBTQI+ community as well as the images used in communications made by the institution. In the images, the stereotypical presence of men and women who fit a heteronormative pattern is prominent.

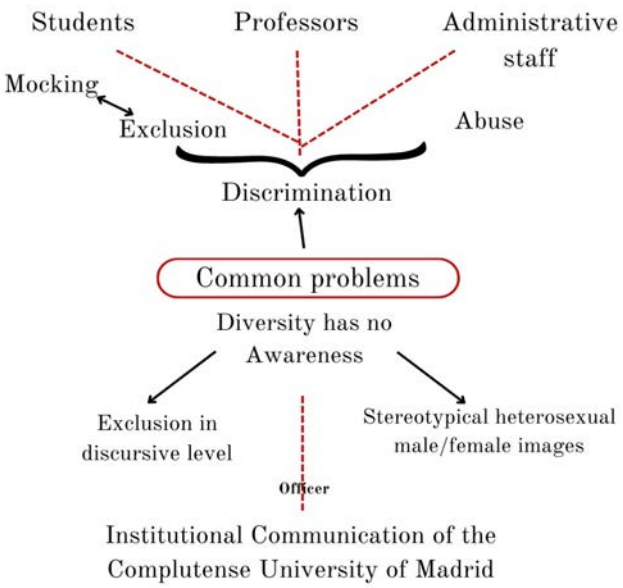


Figure 3: Challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ community at CUM

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A contradiction in its communicative material is identified that can be related to CUM's neutrality in its commitment to the group. For example, students claim to feel good at the university, referring to it as a place where their identity is most respected at the institutional level and they emphasize the good reception they receive from the Gender Equality Unit when they go to it. However, they also recognize a gap in the care of certain needs, identifying there is little listening and denial in the face of certain realities experienced by the LGBTQI+ community in the academic context.

In this regard, students defend that there is a need for greater tolerance towards differences with the teachers, as well as an increase of the visibility of the units inside the university that are dedicated to offer specific services to the groups in need.

For their part, the inclusion coordinators allude to the need to implement different strategies in each faculty, since these are very specific cases that must be treated by considering the particularities of those affected. In any case, the naturalization of diverse conduct and the adaptation of the institutional message to the language of the present students are fundamental factors to obtain total inclusion at CUM.

Concerning the barriers that the LGBTQI+ community faces at CUM, institutional passivity in communication is emphasized once again. There is a void at listening and satisfying the specific needs of this community, by the administration of the university.

Once the main challenges were identified, the interviewees were asked to develop a proposal for improvement that could be applied at CUM. As seen in Figure 4, the new communicative proposal of the university is as much based on the execution and diffusion of obligatory formative actions for teaching staff and personnel of the institution as on designing a guide of good practices that can be applied in the classroom. In addition, the community mentioned the importance of developing a specific protocol against homophobic violence and implementing actions to raise consciousness and awareness of the institution's commitment. For everyone, the communicative strategy must be synonymous with support, encouraging the general perception of the campus as being a place of mutual support between the LGBTQI+ community and the rest of the community at CUM.



Figure 4: Proposals for improvement

Focusing attention on a concrete sub-group of the community, transsexual students interviewed highlight some institutional initiatives, like the creation of support networks by the Diversity Unit with the purpose of encouraging a feeling of belonging. An example of this is a WhatsApp group created ad hoc to put these students in touch. On the contrary, they also demand improvements in the services, like the development of emotional support and accompaniment, greater promotion of research, and the active participation of students to design protocols for the eradication of discrimination and violence towards the LGBTQI+ community.

IV. Conclusions

Although the Complutense University of Madrid can consider itself to be a respectful and violent-free atmosphere for the LGBTQI+ community, the results obtained affirm that the institution needs to reformulate its communication strategy if it wants to position itself as

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being a place that not only observes and approves, but that acts as well. Members of the LGBTQI+ community claim that an increase in actions that praise the institution's inclusive and diverse character, as well as recognizing the barriers that exist and finding solutions that improve the university environment are needed. In order to generate a social awareness and tolerance that users do not always perceive in the environment, CUM has to increase its communication flow and manage it for strategic purposes, dedicating more space in its social profiles to the requirements and interests of the group itself. In other words, the university must no longer remain neutral and needs to position itself on the side of a group that is demanding a voice and attention in the academic context.

There is little sense of belonging to the institution, despite CUM's attempts to connect with its audience, which is evident in its active presence on various social networks. The content analysis, the survey, and the interviews all reflect the community's unawareness of services and groups designed to offer them help, such as the Office of Sexual Diversity and Gender Identity or inclusion coordinators. If those concerned are not aware of the existence of such services, they cannot turn to them. As a result, the university itself is undermining the achievement of its fundamental goal of integration.

Although CUM has a Guide for the Use of Non-Sexist Language, which includes sections dedicated to LGBTQI+ community messages, part of the community believes that the institution's communicative model uses heteronormative patterns, emphasizing that language is one of the influential factors. This can be interpreted as a lack in strategy for institutional dissemination, which results in little awareness of the protocols to be followed in each situation. The same is true for harassment protocols. The students pointed out that this is another area that needs improvement, as if the protocols did not already exist when in reality the action protocols in the face of sexual or sexist harassment is available on the Gender Equality Unit's website. Again, the same conclusion: if the information is not spread correctly, it is as if it does not exist for the community.

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