



## The role of algorithms in social media activism: a case study of LGBTQ+ in Lithuania

El papel de los algoritmos en el activismo en las redes sociales:  
El caso de LGBTQ+ en Lituania

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### Resumen

**Introducción:** Este estudio explora el papel de los algoritmos de los medios sociales en las acciones de activismo en los medios sociales para la representación de las uniones civiles LGBTQ+. Las plataformas de medios sociales, en particular Facebook, categorizan a los usuarios de manera que los exponen principalmente a contenidos específicos, lo que representan las burbujas de los medios sociales y las cámaras de eco, que pueden distorsionar la percepción pública y amplificar los puntos de vista extremos. **Metodología:** Utilizando una combinación de análisis de contenido cualitativo y cuantitativo, junto con una revisión de la literatura académica pertinente, esta investigación identifica los temas predominantes dentro de estos entornos digitales. **Resultados:** Los resultados revelan la existencia de distintas burbujas de filtros en torno al tema de las uniones civiles entre personas del mismo sexo, caracterizadas por una falta de neutralidad y una polarización de las opiniones. Seis temas clave surgieron del análisis de contenido: un encuadre populista de la legislación, la posición de Lituania en un contexto global, las percepciones de la familia, las implicaciones legales y sociales, el discurso sobre la igualdad de derechos

y protecciones, y las opiniones externas de la comunidad LGBTQ+. **Discusión:** El análisis demuestra que, si bien existen claras divisiones entre partidarios y detractores de la legislación sobre uniones civiles, las perspectivas neutrales están en gran medida ausentes, y las fuentes de los medios de comunicación se mantienen pasivas e ineficaces a la hora de facilitar un diálogo equilibrado. Este estudio pone de relieve el papel crucial de los algoritmos en la configuración del discurso social y las implicaciones para el activismo LGBTQ+ en Lituania.

## Palabras Clave

Algoritmos de redes sociales; activismo LGBTQ+; burbujas de filtros; uniones civiles, percepción pública.

## Abstract

**Introduction:** This study explores the role of social media algorithms in social media activism related to the representation of LGBTQ+ civil partnerships. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, categorize users in ways that primarily expose them to targeted content, creating social media bubbles and echo chambers that can distort public perception and amplify extreme viewpoints. **Methodology:** Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis, alongside a review of relevant academic literature, this research identifies the predominant themes within these digital environments. **Results:** The findings reveal the existence of distinct filter bubbles surrounding the topic of same-sex civil partnerships, characterized by a lack of neutrality and strong polarization of opinions. Six key themes emerged from the content analysis: populist framing of legislation, Lithuania's position in a global context, perceptions of family, legal and social implications, discourse on equal rights and protections, and external perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community. **Discussion:** The analysis demonstrates that while clear divisions exist between supporters and opponents of civil partnership legislation, neutral perspectives are largely absent. Media sources remain passive and ineffective in facilitating balanced dialogue. This study highlights the crucial role of algorithms in shaping social discourse and discusses the implications for LGBTQ+ activism in Lithuania.

## Keywords

Social media algorithms; LGBTQ+ activism; filter bubbles; civil partnerships; public perception.

# 1. Introduction

Algorithms on social media platforms categorize users into filter bubbles and echo chambers where they are exposed to targeted information. This trend is particularly prevalent on Facebook, which is used by 67% of EU citizens, and leads to the reinforcement of connections with like-minded individuals, ultimately fostering radicalization, political division and hindering democratic processes. This phenomenon distorts public opinion as users are unaware that the content they see is personalized, leading to a fragmented social network and the amplification of extreme viewpoints. The main problem with social media opinion-forming is the unreliable nature of the information presented.

The aim of the article is to examine the representation of LGBTQ+ civil partnership in social media filter bubbles and echo chambers in Lithuania. The objectives are to define the phenomenon of filter bubbles in social media, to describe the problematic aspects of public opinion formation in social media, to examine the representation of LGBTQ+ civil partnership in social media filter bubbles, and to make recommendations on how public opinion should be formed on sensitive issues. Research methods include academic literature review and qualitative and quantitative content analysis, using framing technique.

Empirical research has shown that Facebook has created distinct filter bubbles around LGBTQ+ civil partnerships – with one side being supportive and the other oppositional. There is little room for neutrality within these bubbles, and the strong beliefs held by individuals in each bubble serve to further

divide both sides. Politicians and organizations aligned with either bubble use the platform to influence public opinion on issues such as LGBTQ+ civil partnerships or similar legal arrangements such as civil unions. The main topics that emerged from this research include: a populist stance on legislation, Lithuania's position in the global context, the concept of family as natural, the legal and societal implications, and the importance of equal rights and protection.

The findings point to a need for more neutral and fact-based contributions to discussions, possibly through the involvement of experts who could provide factual clarity and counter misinformation. Recommendations include introducing measures by legislative bodies or social media platforms to reduce algorithm-driven content polarization and foster a more constructive debate on sensitive issues.

## 2. Literature review

Filter bubbles are defined in academic literature as "a unique universe of information for each of us" (Pariser, 2011 p.127). The filter bubble refers to our search history, preferences and demographics that dictate what content we find on different internet platforms. It is the phenomenon whereby Google, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms use algorithms to prioritize content that matches an individual's demographic profile and past online history, fundamentally altering their exposure to diverse news content and other information, creating a 'you loop' (Pariser, 2011). Domingos (2018) defines an algorithm as "a sequence of instructions that tells a computer what to do" (Domingos, 2018, p. 67). According to Hoffmann et al., (2019), because algorithms are created by humans, they are not necessarily fair, flawless, unbiased or omniscient. Myles et al. (2023) identified five important algorithmic issues affecting the lives of LGBTQ+ users: The ability of sorting algorithms to identify, categorize, and predict users' sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and the role of recommendation algorithms in mediating LGBTQ+ identities, affinities, and cultures; the development of automated anti-LGBTQ+ speech detection and filtering software and the collateral damage caused to LGBTQ+ users; the power struggle over the nature and types of visibility given to LGBTQ+ issues online; and the general legitimization of cisgender normative biases through platform features.

Filter bubbles are individually catered, invisible, and involuntary – three new aspects that individuals did not encounter before the creation of algorithmic filters (Margery Carvajal, & Bonilla, 2025; Pariser, 2011). Another possible definition for filter bubbles is the reception of tailored information fitting pre-existing attitudes, as an individualized result of information search, perception, selection, and memory (Geschke et al., 2019; Talamanca et al., 2022).

According to Pariser (2011), the prevalence of filter bubbles began in December 2009, when Google announced that searches on their engine would employ data such as a user's browser and physical location to predict the kind of person they are and what results to provide accordingly. Therefore, research became individualized and began to differ between people. Google states as much on its support website, naming such reasons as time, location, language, device type, and activity to the question "Why your Google Search results might differ from other people".

Social Media Bubbles term refers to a situation where users are exposed mainly to information and opinions that reinforce their existing beliefs and preferences. Because algorithms tend to prioritize content that aligns with a user's past behavior and interactions, users can become trapped in a bubble

where they see a limited range of viewpoints. Echo Chambers are like social media bubbles but are more focused on the social dynamics of information sharing. In an echo chamber, a group's beliefs are reinforced by repeated exposure to similar perspectives, often resulting in polarization. Social media algorithms can promote echo chambers by curating content that resonates with a group's views, minimizing exposure to dissenting opinions Diakopoulos (2019).

Srnicek (2017) articulated the goal of social platforms - infrastructures that enable interaction while acting as intermediaries between users, including customers and advertisers - as turning the data collected about their customers' preferences and activities into revenue for the platform. According to Thorson et al., (2021), digital trace data is used by Facebook to predict users' interests, to help the news feed algorithm rank relevant stories, and to categorize these users for target advertisers.

Research by Kitchens et al., (2020) found that Facebook tends to polarize users, particularly conservative ones, more than social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit. In fact, "on Facebook, inflammatory content tends to drive the most engagement because it evokes emotion" (Kitchens et al., 2020, p. 1620). When conservative people used Facebook recommendations and spent more time on the platform, their news consumption was about 30 percent more conservative than it would normally be (Kitchens et al., 2020; Lazarsfeld et al., 2021). The same is true for liberal users, but to a lesser extent. The researchers also conclude that Facebook is the most complete embodiment of the features that might influence its users' news consumption choices (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2020; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2018). Sunstein (2017) laments that the existence of echo chambers, both online and offline, is detrimental to a healthy democracy. Pariser (2011) concludes that online platforms are damaging democracy and the well-being of individuals and communities through algorithmic polarization. Both authors agree that algorithmic platforms lead to less exchange between citizens with opposing political views and more polarization, which undermines democracy.

Social media platforms are the public forums of the digital age (Palomo et al., 2024), differing only in their private ownership (Everett, 2019). According to a survey by the Pew Research Center (2020), 36 per cent of adults in the US "regularly get news from Facebook", with almost two-thirds of women doing so, compared to one-third of men. For this reason, Riemer and Peter (2021) see Facebook's appropriation of speech for content that promotes its private interests as dangerous. The researchers identify 'algorithmic audience' (Riemer & Peter, 2021), the algorithmic determination of an audience for each message that increases or suppresses its circulation as a means of maximizing platform profit, as the dominant form of suppression of free speech on social media platforms that would lead to media activism suppression. LGBTQ+ communities were among the first to appropriate the Internet to experiment with their identities and socialize outside of mainstream society (Myles et al., 2023).

Media activism is a broad form of activism or civic public action that uses media and communication technologies for social and political movements. It involves tactics like publishing news on websites, creating video and audio investigations, spreading information about protests, and organizing campaigns related to media and communications policies (Woods, 2022). Social media's interactive features and widespread adoption allow users to quickly disseminate information and rally supporters, reaching a much larger audience than traditional media (Torrecilla et al., 2021). Social media activism allows people to discuss and organize issues that are important to them. Social media provides opportunities for grassroots movements to take shape and go further. Social media is about conversations. Platforms have become catalysts for social movements, giving users the chance to amplify their voices and platform and use their talents for something bigger than themselves (Khiri, 2022). Social Media world is a place for

public activism that influences real-life political developments, for example the #Black Lives Matter movement that developed as a hashtag on social media, or the #MeToo and Fridays for Future social movements (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). In addition, Anjum and Katarya (2024) suggested that information and communication technologies have evolved a lot and now most people use the internet to share their opinions more openly and very often they use hate speech which is collected and disseminated on various platforms. The anonymity and mobility afforded by these social media platforms allows people to hide behind a screen and spread hate with ease. However, online space can also be exploited by populist politicians. By systematically examining how digital media use and political variables are linked through causal and correlational evidence, Lorenz-Spreen et al., (2023) found an overall tendency for digital media to increase knowledge, participation and polarization, while decreasing trust.

The emotional and psychological state of social media users also plays a role in online debates, according to Wollebæk et al. (2019). Anger encourages discussions with other individuals who hold similar and different views, as well as a higher frequency of confirmation bias - seeking information that confirms one's perspective. Therefore, Wollebæk et al. (2019) believe that echo chambers are reinforced by anger and counteracted by anxiety or fear. Segado-Boj and Díaz-Campo (2020) note that there is a need for external auditing and advice to evaluate the algorithms used by social media platforms and to promote information plurality. One of the solutions offered by the researchers is the addition of the important reaction on Facebook specifically, in the vein of 'like', 'love', 'care' and other reactions currently available. This would potentially motivate more relevant issues and problems to be visible, increasing the reach of such information over emotionally charged posts.

Attitudes toward same-sex partnerships have undergone significant transformation over recent decades. As of today, civil marriage for same-sex couples has been legalized in 33 countries worldwide. 19 of these countries are in Europe, where the majority of countries have achieved equal marriage rights through legislation, some through litigation and referendums (Shahid, 2023). The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) have often considered cases concerning the right of LGBT+ people to form legal unions, claiming that individual European states had violated their rights under EU law and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Recent additions include Slovenia, where the Constitutional Court ruled in 2022 that the ban on same-sex marriage violated the Slovenian constitution, and Andorra, where same-sex couples will have the same rights and status in marriage as heterosexual couples from February 2023 (Shahid, 2023). Denmark was the first country in the world to allow same-sex civil unions in 1989 (Johnson, 2012). The Netherlands was the second country to allow same-sex couples to register their partnerships, starting in 1998, and the first to legalize same-sex marriage in 2000 (Trandafir, 2014). Research suggests that the ability for same-sex couples to legally marry is the less stigmatizing option compared to legal statuses such as civil unions and domestic partnerships (Hull, 2006).

Supporters of same-sex marriage argue that legal recognition would give same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual couples. According to Hull (2006), civil unions or registered partnerships provide significant equality for same-sex couples by granting them matrimonial rights and benefits. The implementation of such a law is viewed as a major step towards recognizing the rights of same-sex couples (Zuiderveld Borgesius, 2018).

Hull (2006) and Turner et al. (2018) found a lack of neutral ground and nuance in the debate surrounding the legalization of same-sex marriage, further polarizing the two sides with an all-or-nothing approach. The opposing party does not engage with the perspective of same-sex marriage from a human rights

perspective, but instead focuses on the victim versus aggressor approach, thus obscuring the power and political influence of religious institutions (Bom et al., 2015). By positioning themselves as having their rights curtailed, they shift the focus away from the LGBT+ people whose equal rights would actually be affected (Ventrifoglio et al., 2021).

Previous research in European countries and the United States suggests that a shift towards more tolerant and supportive social attitudes towards the legalization of same-sex relationships results from intergroup social contact and positive media coverage, which help to reduce prejudice (Riggle et al., 1996; Schiappa et al., 2006; Zuiderveen Borgesius, 2016).

In summary, filter bubbles are a self-serving, invisible and involuntary phenomenon where our search history, preferences and demographics determine what content we find on different internet platforms. On social media platforms such as Facebook, algorithms (sequences of instructions) determine which content to prioritize in a person's news feed based on engagement, such as reactions. Filter bubbles distort public opinion because users think their content is the same as everyone else's and do not realize it is personalized, resulting in intellectual isolation for users who are mostly exposed to information that matches their preconceived notions.

### 3. Objectives and hypothesis

The article aims to examine the representation of LGBTQ+ civil partnership in social media filter bubbles and echo chambers in Lithuania. The tasks are to define the phenomenon of filter bubbles in social media, to describe the problematic aspects of public opinion formation in social media, to examine the representation of LGBTQ+ civil partnership in social media filter bubbles, and to make recommendations on how public opinion should be formed on sensitive issues.

- H1: Social media filter bubbles significantly influence users' perceptions of LGBTQ+ civil partnerships in Lithuania, leading to a polarized understanding of the issue.
- H2: Members of social media echo chambers exhibit more extreme attitudes toward LGBTQ+ civil partnerships than those who engage with diverse viewpoints.
- H3: The representation of LGBTQ+ civil partnerships in social media directly correlates with the formation of public opinion

### 4. Methodology

*Research objective:* To explore the representation of same-sex partnership and civil union on Facebook in Lithuania.

*Type of research:* Qualitative, to gain an in-depth understanding of how same-sex partnerships and civil unions are represented on Facebook. According to Flick (2018), qualitative research has become more relevant to the study of social relations due to the 'pluralization of life worlds'. It is best suited to analyzing specific problems that arise in concrete situations in a local context. It allows researchers to study reality as "constructed by different actors" (Flick, 2018, p. 18) and structures of meaning are acquired from the text as empirical material.

**Research tool:** Data from Facebook. According to Franz et al. (2019), social media, and Facebook in particular, are "a potentially rich source of qualitative data for researchers" as they provide a space for conducting, displaying and recording individuals' social lives. (Franz et al., 2019 p.27), One of the three main types of textual data generated by users are posts, here passively analyzed, a method defined by Franz et al. (2019) as "the study of information patterns observed on Facebook or the interactions between users in existing Facebook groups". (Franz et al., 2019, p.34). To examine the representation of same-sex partnerships and civil unions on Facebook, a keyword search is conducted to discover posts on the topic, which are then coded into units, categories and themes using the inductive approach, defined by Chandra and Shang (2019) as "a process in which the researcher reads and interprets raw textual data to develop concepts and themes," which are discovered by repeatedly examining and comparing the data - in the case of this research, Facebook posts. (Chandra&Shang, 2019, p.80)

**Scope of the research:** In order to present the most relevant data, the research will focus on the period between 21 May 2021 and 11 April 2023. The research will examine Facebook posts from 21 May 2021, when a Partnership Bill recognizing same-sex unions was first registered in the Lithuanian Parliament, until 11 April 2023, when three same-sex couples announced that they would take the State of Lithuania to court for failing to legally recognize same-sex partnerships and marriages. The Law on Partnership defined partnership as "the fact of cohabitation of two persons (partners), registered in accordance with the procedure established by legal acts, for the purpose of establishing and/or developing and protecting the relationship of the partners, based on a permanent emotional bond, mutual understanding, responsibility, assistance, respect and/or similar relations, and a voluntary commitment to assume certain rights and obligations" (XIVP-537, 2023). Both same-sex and opposite-sex couples would have been able to enter into a partnership under the proposed law. Partners would have been allowed to adopt one of their surnames as their common surname or to use a double surname, would have been able to act on behalf of and in the interests of each other, to represent each other in health care institutions, to obtain information about their partner's health, and to be exempted from giving evidence against each other in court. A registered partnership could have been dissolved by a notary. The Partnership Bill made no reference to 'family' and did not allow partners to adopt children. The gender-neutral Partnership Bill was rejected by the Lithuanian Parliament on 25 May 2021. On 16 May 2022, a new civil union bill was proposed, defining civil unions as "a voluntary agreement between two persons (partners), registered in accordance with the procedure established by law, by which they seek to establish, develop and protect their relationship" (XIVP-1694, 2022). The relationship between the two parties entering into a civil union is no longer referred to as a "partnership." Civil unions would be registered with a notary, unlike the partnerships described in the Partnership Bill, which would have been registered at the registry office. The Civil Union Bill would give partners the right to inherit each other's property, to represent each other in health institutions and to receive information about their partner's health. However, partners would not be allowed to choose a common surname, and the 'emotional bond' that was present in the definition of a partnership in the previous bill is no longer present in the Civil Union Bill.

**Research sampling:** Purposive criterion sampling. As defined by Patton (2001), this type of sampling is used to "examine and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance." (Patton, 2001, p. 238) When it comes to Facebook data used for qualitative content analysis, Franz et al. (2019) advise using filters such as likes and reactions to manage search results, "given how extensive the amount of Facebook data can be." (Franz et al., 2019, p.3). Following this principle, only posts that received more than 100 reactions are selected for qualitative content analysis. Within these posts, only the textual information will be analyzed, visual content will not be considered. Only public posts will be

selected for the research, and the results will be filtered by year, from 2021 to 2023, as more precise time constraints are not available. The exact date of each post in the search results is then analyzed, and only those posts that fall within the previously defined scope of the research are selected.

**Research model:** The model represents the relationships between the data analyzed to answer the research question of how same-sex civil partnership is represented in social media. Facebook posts belonging to different filter bubbles were analyzed according to the five criteria shown: source activity; relationship and motivation; position, its relationship to their activity; distribution of reactions; categories. 'Source' refers to the author of a Facebook post under analysis. 'Categories' refer to the six themes into which they have been grouped according to the reasoning given in them.

A qualitative and quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts was conducted in order to identify and analyze how same-sex civil partnership and civil union bills are represented, and thus gain insight into the political polarization of the issue within Lithuanian society. The initial search results yielded a total of 172 public posts according to the parameters specified in the research methodology. From this number, 10 posts were eliminated because they contained the specified search terms but dealt with other issues, such as campaign fundraising, the mayoral race, issues related to homosexuality and trans rights, but did not focus on the gender-neutral partnership and civil union bills, or touched on other political issues altogether. This left a total of 162 public posts retrieved from Facebook for content analysis.

The people who posted on the issues of same-sex civil partnerships and/or civil unions were private and public individuals: politicians, lawyers, teachers, and private organizations such as non-governmental organizations and the media. A total of 69 sources were analyzed, see Annex 1 for a detailed list of numbered sources and their characteristics. Same-sex civil partnership and civil union legislation is referred to as 'the legislation' throughout the research findings.

Facebook posts were analyzed according to the following criteria and theoretical background:

1. Source activity (Krippendorf, 2019).
2. Source relationship and motivation (Krippendorf, 2019).
3. Source position, its relationship to their activity (Krippendorf, 2019)
4. Distribution of answers (Krippendorf, 2019)
5. Categories (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017).

These criteria were chosen according to methodological guidelines. The first four criteria followed the analytic construct model, which "operationalizes what the content analyst knows, suspects or assumes about the context of the text and procedurally explains the drawing of inferences from that text", as defined by Krippendorff (2019, P. 124). Categories, themes and coding units have been described by Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017) as a way of "systematically transforming a large amount of text into a highly organized and concise summary of key findings" (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017, p.7-8).

## 5. Results

**Source activity.** The first criterion for summarizing the research results aims to quantify the activity of the sources analyzed - how many times each of the 69 sources posted and what percentage of the total posts they represented.

Table 1. Percentage of source activity

Sources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9-13	14-26	27-69
Percentage	15.4	9.3	5.6	4.9	3.7	3.6	3.1	2.5	9.3	16.0	26.5

Source: compiled by the authors (2025)

The figures presented (Table 1) suggest that interest in the research topic remained high during the analyzed part of the 2020-2024 parliamentary term, even if most sources only posted once, as far as the search results displayed according to the research parameters are concerned. It is noteworthy that the most active voices, sources 1 to 8, who published at least 4 entries expressing their opinion on the legislation, accounted for almost half of all public posts – 48% (78 entries). It is also significant that the most active source (Source 1) published almost a third of these posts, 32% (25 posts). The data suggests that only eight sources took the lead in arguing for or against same-sex partnerships or civil unions, setting the thematic tone for the rest.

*Source relation and motivation.* The second criterion concerns the relationship between the sources analyzed and their political or ideological position, which helps to better understand the motivation of the sources, in addition to the network of support and common interests that emerge. The source analysis reveals eight voices as the driving force behind the conversation on legislation on Facebook. There could be several reasons for this tendency.

First, Sources 1 to 8 all play an active role in the legislative process, whether as lawyers, lobbyists or politicians, and their interests overlap or coincide. Sources 1 and 5 are Members of Parliament with opposing views, with Source 1 chairing the Human Rights Committee and supporting the new legislation, and Source 5 acting as deputy chair of the Legal Affairs Committee and opposing the Partnership and Civil Union Bill. Sources 2 and 6 are non-governmental advocacy organizations, with the former's objective being to participate in the legislative process to pursue its goal. Sources 7 and 3 are closely linked to the organizations described above. Source 7 works for Source 2 as a legal expert and as a news and opinion contributor, often writing for its website, while Source 3 is the director of Source 6. Finally, Sources 4 and 8 are also linked, with Source 8 being a presumed member of Source 4's Assembly for Christian and Nationally Minded Individuals, contributing to their website on various topics and linking to Source 4 on her Facebook profile.

Secondly, as parties involved in the same-sex relationship legislation, the top eight sources have a personal or political interest in whether one of the two bills is passed in Parliament. Sources 1 and 5 toe the party line on which they were elected and presumably have an interest in future re-election. Sources 2 and 7 advocate and lobby against the passage of the legislation, while sources 3 and 6 argue for equal rights for all Lithuanian citizens. Source 8 has obvious political ambitions, having recently been elected to the Vilnius City Council. Source 4 provides a platform for Source 8 and other Christian-minded individuals to express their political views.

*Source position and its relation to their activity.* In terms of how sources position themselves in relation to the proposed legislation, overall, 49.4% of sources provide arguments against the civil partnership or civil union bills, slightly more than the 47.5% of voices that discuss the issue in a positive light. The ideological divide is clearer and more pronounced within the eight most active sources, with 62.5% opposing the legislation and only 37.5% arguing in favor.

It is worth noting, however, that although opposition voices made up almost two-thirds of the top eight sources, their activity did not outweigh that of the top three proponents of the legislation. Of the total 78 posts published by sources 1 to 8, a slight majority (51.28%, 40 posts) came from supporters of the Same Sex Partnership and Civil Union Bill. The opposition remained two posts behind with 38, 48.7% of activity.

This notable lack of the expected causality between the number of sources supporting the legislation, which was lower than the number of sources opposing it, and the number of posts from supportive sources can be explained by the outsized activity of Source 1. As a politician who was ideologically in favor of the legislation, was elected with a party that supported same-sex partnerships, and served on the parliamentary committee that considered the bill, the fact that Source 1 expressed their position on Facebook up to 25 times becomes contextually understandable.

The only truly neutral source was number 43, who posted just once on 11 April 2023 about same-sex couples going to court over the issue of partnership and civil marriage recognition. Sources 14 and 19 were considered neutral/mixed positive because they each posted twice, once in a way that was perceived as neutral and another time with a positive spin. All three neutral/mixed positive sources are media.

**Distribution of reactions.** This criterion aims to show the popularity of sources according to the number of reactions they receive on Facebook. The data is sorted according to the sources' ideological position on the legislation. Posts in favor of legalizing same-sex relationships received a higher number of reactions than those against the legislation.

Bearing in mind the data analyzed in the previous criteria, where the number of posts in favor was slightly lower than the number opposed (79 compared to 80), it is noteworthy that posts in favor of the introduced legislation received 6.6% more reactions. Judging by the sample of 162 posts analyzed, it seems that the voices in favor of same-sex partnerships or civil unions are slightly more popular than those against.

**Categories.** Although 162 posts were analyzed, several of them were substantial (including 700 words or more) and fit into several categories. Therefore, the number of coding units found that fit into these categories (250) exceeds the number of posts.

The Table 2 shows the categories discovered during the research, the total number of coding units belonging to these categories, and how this number is distributed between supportive and oppositional sources. As can be seen, the most popular category concerning the proposed legislation on both sides was 'Public pressure,' followed by 'Lithuania's positioning in comparison with other countries' and 'Family concept.'

Many of the categories are related in their arguments. For example, 'the concept of the family' is closely related to 'legislation affecting children's welfare,' 'legislation leading to changes in children's education' and 'legislation as defiance of 'natural' gender roles.' Therefore, the 20 categories discovered through content analysis are grouped into 6 themes according to the reasoning within their coding units.

**Populist approach to the legislation.** This theme contains the most coding units of any grouping (78) and four categories: 'public pressure,' 'opinion on the possibility of passing the legislation,' 'problematization of prioritization of legislation in the context of war, economic hardship' and 'falsification of facts to achieve legislation.' The coding units have an 'us versus them' mentality and try to divide the public with populist

statements and unfounded promises or demands. The category 'public pressure' refers to the analyzed sources using the public to argue for or against the proposed legislation. The coding units use language that pits 'the people' against 'the parliament' in a populist way. All of the top eight sources had coding units that fell into this category, which is understandable given the active role they play in the legislative process, as discussed above. 'Public pressure' was used more often by opponents of the proposed legislation (56% or 22 times), less often by supporters (41% or 16 times) and once by a neutral party.

**Table 2.** The number of supportive, oppositional, and neutral coding units within each category

Category	Support	Oppose	Neutral	Total count
Public pressure	16	22	1	39
Lithuania's positioning by comparison with other countries	15	8		23
Enacted legislation leading to changes to the Lithuanian legal system	6	13		19
Opinion about the possibility of passing the legislation	11	3	2	16
Family concept	4	12		16
Partnership or civil union as an alternative to marriage (provides equal rights and protection under law for couple)	9	6		15
Polemizing prioritization of legislation in the context of war, economic hardship	6	8		14
Positioning LGBT rights in the context of the so-called 'East-West confrontation'	11	2		13
Legislation as human rights implementation	12	1		13
Legislation affecting the wellbeing of children	1	9		10
Falsification of facts to achieve legislation	0	9		9
Usage of the authority of the Catholic Church in discussing the legislation	4	5		9
Dehumanizing LGBT people in the legislation discourse	3	6		9
Foreign influence on adopt legislation	3	5		8
Legislation in the context of freedom of expression	2	6		8
Legislation leading to changes in education of children	1	6		7
Impact of legislation on demographic factors	5	2		7
Legislation as defiance of 'natural' gender roles	0	6		6
Rights as a zero-sum game	4	2		6
Destructive potential of the legislation		3		3

Source: compiled by the authors (2025)

Source 53 expressed frustration that the legislation had not been prioritized earlier: "The time for partnership is now. Since the restoration of independence, there has not been a SINGLE law protecting the rights of LGBT+ people in Lithuania. Not one. In 32 years." While Source 59 states that the time for

legislation is “long overdue,” 42.8 % or 6 coding units of proponents of the legislation were assigned to this category.

*Lithuania in the global context.* This theme combines the second most popular categories ‘Positioning of Lithuania in comparison with other countries,’ ‘Positioning of LGBT rights in the context of the so-called East-West confrontation’ and ‘Foreign influence on the adoption of the legislation,’ which cover a total of 44 coding units, following the thread of Lithuania’s positioning in the wider international context and the influence of foreign powers on national society. Supporters of the legislation far outnumbered opponents in coding units under these criteria, with 15 or 65 per cent of the total. Their coding units included updates on similar legislation being considered or signed into law in other countries, especially those in Lithuania’s immediate neighborhood, such as “Law on Partnerships in Latvia” (Source 1) and “Estonians moving towards marriage equality” (Source 12). Advocates also used countries that had been at the forefront of equal rights for same-sex couples, such as the Netherlands, as examples for Lithuania to follow: “This year marks the 20th anniversary of the legalization of same-sex marriage in the first country in the world to do so - the Netherlands” (Source 1). The example of Hungary, which has enacted stricter laws regarding the LGBT community, was cited as a warning against backsliding on equal rights in the national context. In addition, other countries were often cited by supporters to illustrate the possibility that marriage equality would not be covered by either of the proposed bills in Lithuania, for example in one coding unit by Source 1: “2021 was a good year for marriage equality around the world. Together with Switzerland and Chile, there are now 31 countries where same-sex couples can get married.”

Opponents were half as likely to use this thematic argument, with 8 coding units or 35% falling into this category. They also referred to marriage equality, but in a negative light, as an inevitability that would be ushered in by the proposed legislation, as was the case in countries such as Slovenia: “All countries that have legalized same-sex partnerships have eventually legalized same-sex marriage” (Source 2) and “The development of the legal system in other countries [...] shows that once partnerships in any form have become legal, they continue to expand on the grounds that there cannot be discrimination between different families” (Source 24). Other European countries were presented as dangerous precedents (again, Slovenia) or as examples of more restrictive legislation, as in the case of Italy: “same-sex marriage is banned in Italy and only civil unions are allowed, without the right to adopt your partner’s children” (source 67).

*Family as nature.* The third theme comprises 39 coding units covering legislation related to the family, children’s interests and gender roles in the categories ‘concept of the family,’ ‘legislation affecting children’s welfare,’ ‘legislation leading to changes in children’s upbringing,’ and ‘legislation as defiance of ‘natural’ gender roles.’ Nature was the underlying argument in all of these categories, especially when it understood of the family, the inclusion of children in the concept, their existence and upbringing as possible only between the opposite sexes, and the complementarity of men and women.

All of these categories were overwhelmingly supported by sources opposing the legislation. “The ‘concept of the family’ was the most discussed category in this theme and the majority of coding units (12, or 75%) came from opposition sources. They argue that the proposed legislation will dismantle the widely accepted description of the family as “the civil and/or religious marriage between a man and a woman and the children born and brought up in it” (Source 61) and diminish the value of this fundamental institution by equating same-sex relationships with it: “At the national level, the value of the institution of the family is being relativized by forcibly equating it with the ‘family’ of homosexual persons” (Source 2).

The category 'legislation leading to changes in the education of children' was also mentioned only once by a supportive source. The rest of the coding units (6, or 86%) were critical of the proposed legislation as a means of indoctrinating young minds. They argued that 'non-traditional families' (meaning same-sex) would be presented in schools as a legitimate alternative to the 'traditional family between a man and a woman' (Source 2), that sex education classes would teach about the LGBT+ community and relationships as normal from kindergarten: "the propaganda of the rainbow minorities to the very youngest children around the world, from kindergarten" (Source 57). While parents would lose their right to raise their children according to their worldview if it promoted 'natural families:' 'a law that forbids parents to raise their children according to their own beliefs, which are closely linked to the natural family, because it violates their right to be considered a 'family' too" (Source 66). They also feared that popular culture as a whole, such as books and films, instilled a progressive definition of family. Similarly, to a coding unit in the category 'Family Concept' who feared that the LGBT+ community would dismantle the natural family, Source 66 in this category expressed fears that children would be indoctrinated into "a distorted view of reality" and "brought under their influence." The only coding unit from a supportive source in relation to schools, which also questioned the validity of the fears previously expressed, was in relation to the resistance of schools to address LGBT+ issues.

Legal and societal impact. A total of 37 coding units were assigned to this topic, which dealt with the impact of legislation on the Lithuanian legal system, freedom of speech, demographic and social factors within the categories 'enacted legislation leading to changes in the Lithuanian legal system,' 'impact of legislation on demographic factors,' 'legislation related to freedom of speech' and 'destructive potential of legislation.' Coding units within the first of the listed categories were twice as common among opposition sources, with 13, or 68%, compared to 6, or 32%, among supportive sources. Many of the arguments sound similar to those coded under the category 'concept of family.' but here they are presented in terms of possible constitutional and legal changes: "Partnership will change the legal concept of family from [...] (Article 38 of the Constitution)" and "Civil union would legalize nothing other than a legal family relationship between persons of the same sex" (both Source 2), as opposed to the position of legislation against tradition and nature expressed earlier. Fears that the legislation will lead to court challenges for marriage equality are also expressed, as was the case in the category 'Lithuania's positioning in comparison with other countries,' where the same possibility was mentioned in an international context. Overall, the most troubling aspect for these sources is that, in their understanding, the legislation goes against the Constitution and will use the legal system in favor of promoting LGBT+ rights, with Source 2 stating that the aim of the legislation is to "circumvent the constitutional provision that marriage is only possible between a man and a woman," or Source 7 perceiving that "all they need is a legal fact. Civil unions. The lawsuits will follow." Source 7 even saw legal implications in the introduction of the concept of 'partner' in the Diplomatic Service Act, which would "provide a diplomat's partner with all the social guarantees available to a diplomat's spouse."

Equal rights and protection. This theme includes the categories 'Legislation as an alternative to marriage providing equal rights and legal protection for couples,' 'Discrimination against same-sex couples leading to their social exclusion,' 'Rights as a zero-sum game' and 'Legislation as the implementation of human rights,' all of which relate to the equal treatment and rights of same-sex couples compared to opposite-sex couples. The most coding units within this theme were found in the category 'Legislation as an alternative to marriage' - 15, of which 60 per cent were supportive. Source 1 summed up the basis of his category by stating that "we are mainly debating the principle itself - whether unmarried people (including same-sex couples) deserve the protection of the rule of law," as legislation would provide the only way for LGBT+ people to legally protect their relationship. Source 3 suggested

that the legislation would provide security "for partners who are not married or unable to marry," while being clearly framed as having "nothing to do with church marriage or marriage in general." The idea that the legislation would provide an alternative for all couples 'unwilling or unable to marry,' as Source 18 put it, was echoed by several coders, such as Source 14, who stressed the demand for the legislation by "all unmarried couples seeking legal protection," or Source 37, who emphasized the universal appeal of the legislation, which would allow "both heterosexual and homosexual couples to legalize their personal relationships with the protection of the state." Source 1 also noted that although same-sex couples were in the spotlight during the discussions, the legislation to be enacted would most likely also affect the "more than half a million people in Lithuania under the age of 49" who had never married - a figure previously mentioned in the 'impact of legislation on demographic factors' category. Coding units from the opposing side were most concerned that civil partnerships or civil unions provided too many marriage-like rights, essentially disagreeing with the demarcation observed by Source 3.

*LGBT+ community from without.* This theme includes the categories that relate to the LGBT+ community from an outsider's perspective, where unfamiliarity sometimes leads to derogatory, homophobic comments, as was the case with the coding units within 'Dehumanization of LGBT+ people in the legislative discourse,' or misplaced power, as in 'Use of the authority of the Catholic Church in discussing the legislation.' Both categories consisted of 9 coding units each, more than half of which were oppositional sources. In the latter category, sources cited influential Catholic institutions such as the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis as authorities on the issue of the legislation, which in their view "would put unmarried life and same-sex cohabitation on the same level as marriage, which the Church cannot approve of" (Source 2). Supporting sources counter the position of religious figures with arguments about the separation of church and state, stating that the legislation "does not propose to force the Church to register such civil relationships with the Church or to interfere in any other way in the life of the Church" (Source 12), so religious institutions have no reason to interfere. One of the sources suggests that the legislation is in fact "in line with the Catholic mission in the modern world, as expressed in the documents of Pope Francis" (Source 28). It seems that the supporting sources are divided on whether to reject the authority of the Church altogether or to try to appeal to the religious community through their beliefs.

## 6. Conclusions

The research data suggests that only eight sources took the lead in arguing for or against the legislation, setting the thematic tone for the rest of the sources analyzed. Fewer active or popular sources - those that published only one post that received over 100 responses on the topic of legalizing gender-neutral relationships - may indicate the difficulty for new voices to break through on the issue of legislation on Facebook. As Haugen told the US Congress in 2021, Facebook's algorithms are programmed to reward engagement. Sources 1 to 8 posted almost half of all content and received 54 percent of all reactions. There appears to be a correlation between activity and engagement - the more a source posts about the legislation, the more engagement they receive. Following the logic of Haugen's statements, one could conclude that engagement leads to further engagement, driven by Facebook's algorithms. This leaves little room for other sources to gain a following. The ideological divide between sources 1 to 8 is notable, with five opposing the legislation and three posting in support. The ideological divide is less pronounced when looking at all 69 sources, with 32 in favor and 34 against. This suggests that the conversation about the legislation is being driven by a handful of sources from each filter bubble, whose messages are echoed by the rest of the sources. Personal and organizational Facebook pages are used to amplify the message, sometimes repeating the same coding units as many of the sources are interconnected.

The most common category within both filter bubbles was 'public pressure,' which addressed the importance of (majority) opinion in a particularly populist way. The opposition sources took a divisive approach, aiming to pit the people against a democratically elected government and encouraging the public to reclaim their power through petitions and calls for a referendum. In both filter bubbles, different opinion polls were cited as the basis for passing or rejecting the legislation. However, not everyone tended to give equal weight to all opinions. Within the supportive bubble, some sources stated that the opposition had been well heard and that LGBT+ voices should be amplified on this legislation. This sentiment was also present in the category 'Positioning LGBT rights in the context of the so-called East-West confrontation,' where it was noted that within a democratic society, a majority disapproving of the legislation does not justify its rejection.

The 'natural' family was a popular argument used by the opposition to undermine the legislation. In their view, a family can only exist between the opposite sexes and the legislation would remove the special status enjoyed by 'natural' families. This was closely linked to the welfare of children, since families as defined by the opposition provided the only suitable conditions for bringing up children. Same-sex relationships were seen as a fundamental threat to both the traditional family and the children who could only be born into it.

The supportive filter bubble chose to highlight how Lithuania compares with other countries in terms of legislation, emphasizing that as a nation that is falling behind, especially in the European context. Finally, they invoked human rights as a reason to approve the legislation, arguing that same-sex couples will not be part of society as long as they are stigmatized and treated as unequal to heterosexual couples.

A content analysis of Facebook in Lithuania revealed six most prevalent themes regarding the representation of same-sex civil partnerships: a populist approach to the legislation, Lithuania in a global context, family as nature, legal and societal implications, equal rights and protection, and the LGBT+ community from the outside. On Facebook, clear filter bubbles have formed around support and opposition to the legislation, leaving little space for neutrality and nuance, while their categorical approach further polarizes the two sides. The only neutral sources are the media, but they are inactive and uninfluential in the debate.

The most vocal sources have a personal stake in the discourse on same-sex civil partnership or a comparable legal arrangement such as civil union. Politicians and civil society use the Facebook platform to promote their own political interests or organizational goals. This leads to the conclusion that the filter bubbles are not naturally formed entities, but are artificially shaped to advance the political agenda. They raise the issue of same-sex civil partnerships as a way of gaining followers and influence. However, the participation of 69 sources matching the research parameters is evidence that a wider political debate is taking place, with both oppositional and supportive voices well represented. Legal, moral, populist and human rights arguments about the legislation were most prominent in the discussion. The value of public opinion was dominant within the supportive and opposition bubbles.

Many coding units discovered during the research equated same-sex civil partnerships with the family as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, specifically Article 38, with opposition sources fearing that the legislation would circumvent or rewrite the Constitution. However, according to the ruling of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania, this is factually incorrect. Therefore, participants in discussions on sensitive issues are advised to present the full context and avoid manipulating facts.

As algorithms determine what information to show in a news feed based on what someone has previously reacted to, it is recommended that legislative bodies or social media platforms implement initiatives that allow users to opt out of algorithmic content.

Therefore, hypothesis H1 was rejected because the research indicates a significant division in the positions of the sources analyzed, with a notable majority opposing the civil partnership legislation. While the data does suggest some polarization, with 62.5% of the most active sources opposing the legislation and a significant number of posts against it, it lacks concrete evidence specifically linking filter bubbles to user perceptions. Therefore, while there is some evidence of polarization, the hypothesis does not appear to be strongly supported by the results presented. H2 was accepted with caution, because the results show that the most active sources (who could be considered part of echo chambers) are largely oppositional to the legislation, which aligns with the hypothesis that echo chambers may lead to more extreme views. However, the overall engagement levels suggest that even within these echo chambers, there were instances of supportive discourse that garnered significant reactions. This indicates a mix of engagement with extreme attitudes and some level of diversity. The evidence does not strongly confirm that echo chambers are solely responsible for more extreme attitudes. H3 was accepted with reservations, because the data indicates that posts in favor of the legislation received a higher number of reactions, suggesting that these representations may have had an impact on public opinion. However, while the results show a correlation between the representation of LGBTQ+ civil partnerships and the reactions received, they do not definitively establish a direct causation between this representation and the overall formation of public opinion on the issue. The complexity of public opinion formation, influenced by multiple factors beyond social media representation, suggests that while there may be some correlation, direct causation remains ambiguous.

## 7. Limitations of the study

**Research limitations:** According to Cohen et al. (2018), research cannot be completely valid. Therefore, the timeframe chosen to select posts (21 May 2021 to 11 April 2023) may exclude other possible positions on same-sex partnership and civil union legislation from analysis. Because only public posts with more than 100 reactions are examined, private or less popular sources may not be seen, also limiting the range of positions represented. The number of posts analyzed may be limited due to grammatical cases within the Lithuanian language, which limit the search possibilities for keywords that are not exact matches to those entered. Therefore, if a different grammatical case is used for one of the keywords within a public post, it may not be presented during the data collection phase.

## 8. Contributions of the authors

- Conceptualization: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- Software: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- Validation: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- Formal analysis: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- Healing of data: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- Writing-Preparation of the original draft: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- Editorial-Re- vision and Edition: C.M.E.; K.Z.

- Display: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- Supervision: C.M.E.; K.Z.
- All the Authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript: C.M.E.; K.Z.

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## 10. Conflict of interest statement

There is no conflict of interest.

## 11. Statement of responsibility for the use of artificial intelligence

AI is not used.

## 12. Additional materials

Not applicable.

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