



How can media represent LGBTQI+ communities more effectively in Ukraine?

PROJECT BRIEFING
OCTOBER 2023

Introduction

This briefing outlines learnings from producing a series of short documentary films designed to increase understanding around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, intersex (LGBTQI+) communities in Ukraine. It also summarises the findings of BBC Media Action research to understand the experiences and portrayals of, and attitudes towards, LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine, and audience feedback on our films.

BBC Media Action has worked in partnership with Ukraine's public service broadcaster, *Suspilne*, on projects to increase the participation of women and members of LGBTQI+ communities in Ukrainian society, and support equality and inclusion. In 2023, with the support of BBC Media Action, *Suspilne* broadcast 10 short films under the umbrella title *Visible*, to profile the diverse experiences of women and members of LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine and increase their visibility.^a

In terms of LGBTQI+ communities, the *Suspilne* films aimed to:

- Develop relevant and inclusive content that includes marginalised voices and challenges stereotypes
- Make visible the contributions of LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine to the war effort, humanitarian action, and society in general



BRENDAN HOFFMAN/GETTY IMAGES

^a The films were developed under the project *Shifting Perceptions of Women's Participation and Encouraging Visibility and Inclusion of LGBTQI+ Communities in Ukraine*, and as part of an initiative implemented by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) funded by The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

The LGBTQI+ context in Ukraine

Despite some progress on a range of social issues, widespread acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQI+ communities in mainstream Ukrainian society remains precarious. Discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals is still a significant concern. Homophobia, transphobia and other forms of prejudice, can be observed in aspects of Ukrainian society including employment, housing, healthcare and education. LGBTQI+ individuals may face social stigma, harassment and violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹

LGBTQI+ communities have also experienced threats of violence and targeted disinformation from both external and domestic sources. This includes Russian-backed disinformation tactics that use homophobic, sexist and transphobic tropes to portray LGBTQI+ communities as anti-Ukrainian.²

While some LGBTQI+ rights are protected in Ukraine,^b there are still gaps in legislation. Same-sex marriage is not legally recognised, and there is no comprehensive anti-discrimination law that explicitly protects LGBTQI+ individuals from discrimination. Hate crimes and hate speech motivated by homophobia or transphobia are not adequately addressed in the legal framework.³ In the context of the current war, formal same-sex civil unions would result in financial support and official recognition for the partners of soldiers who are killed, and give them the right to make medical decisions if their partners are injured.⁴

There is some evidence that social attitudes in Ukraine towards members of LGBTQI+ communities are becoming more positive. In a recent survey conducted in 2023 by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), relating to the framework of Ukraine's democratic transition, 58% of respondents considered equal justice for all (including social equality and inclusion) as one of the most important characteristics of a fully functioning democracy while 28% of respondents named human rights protection as one of the most important characteristics.⁵ Furthermore, the majority of Ukrainians appear to now support equal rights for LGBTQI+ people (58% of respondents), including the right to civil partnership (56% of respondents).⁶

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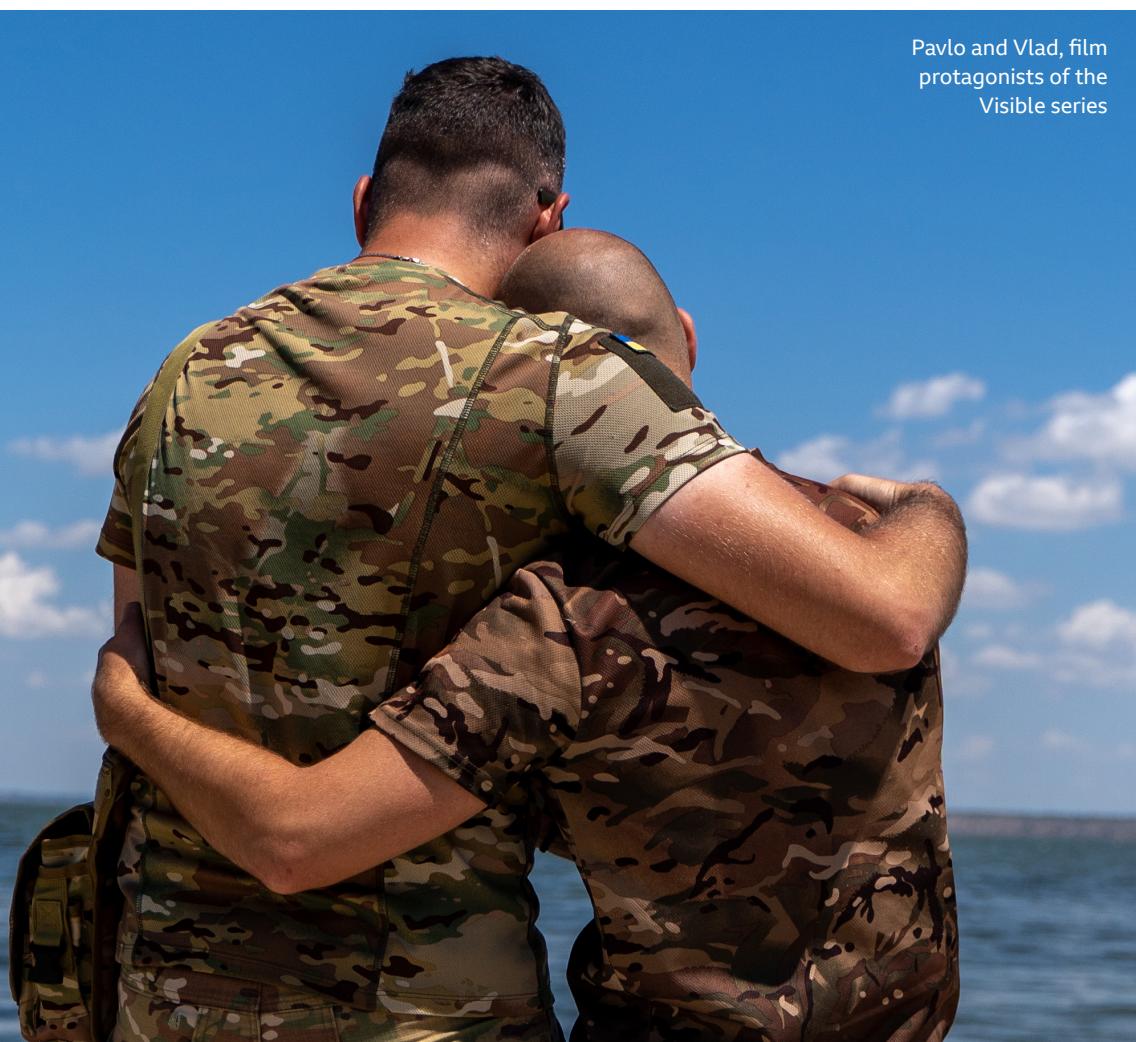
^b For example, the right to change legal gender is legal in Ukraine and there is no censorship of LGBT issues in Ukraine (see Equaldex (2022) *LGBT Rights in Ukraine*. Available at: <https://www.equaldex.com/region/Ukraine>)

The research

BBC Media Action's research aimed to understand:

- The current issues and concerns affecting LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine, and the impact of the war on these communities
- The perceptions and attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities among wider society in Ukraine, and what Ukrainians think of LGBTQI+ communities' contributions to the war effort
- How LGBTQI+ communities are being presented and portrayed in the Ukrainian media, and LGBTQI+ communities' perceptions of media and communication in Ukraine
- How audience members engage with, and respond to, *Suspilne's* *Visible* films portraying members of LGBTQI+ communities and their contributions to Ukrainian society

To do this, BBC Media Action conducted research with LGBTQI+ communities and drew on findings from our [recent research](#), conducted to understand the impact of the war in Ukraine, especially on women and gender dynamics.^c



^c This research formed part of a broader 2022–2023 study to understand gender issues against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. BBC Media Action commissioned large-scale, mixed method research primarily to understand the impacts of the war on women, how they were using media and communication, and how gender roles and attitudes are shifting. The resulting research briefings are available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/europe/ukraine/gender-perceptions>. This research was commissioned under the Transforming Gender Perceptions in Ukraine project, part of an initiative implemented by NDI and funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC).

Methodology

- **A quantitative survey** was conducted by BBC Media Action with 1,500 women and 500 men in government-controlled areas across Ukraine. In the survey, people were asked if they self-identified as LGBTQI+, only 1.75 % of people identified as such (equating to 35 people).
- **Artificial intelligence (AI)** was used to sift through more than 200 Ukrainian online content sources to assess how issues around gender roles and gender identity play out online in Ukraine.
- **Qualitative research** on LGBTQI+ issues was also conducted, consisting of:
 - Formative research between November 2022 and January 2023 to inform the development of media output
 - Evaluative research in August 2023 to understand how audiences engage with the media output produced

The methods used in the qualitative research are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Qualitative research

Phase	Method	Sample	Purpose
Formative	In-depth interviews conducted online	12 qualitative interviews conducted with members of LGBTQI+ communities	To understand their experiences of the war, including attitudes towards them and their experience of discrimination
	Key informant interviews conducted via telephone	8 interviews with gender experts, with backgrounds in non-governmental and civil society organisations, the media and activism	To gain a broader perspective on the impacts of the war on LGBTQI+ communities
	Online focus group discussions (FGDs)	8 FGDs with women: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 with internally displaced persons (IDPs) • 4 with non-IDPs 4 FGDs with men: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 with IDPs • 2 with non-IDPs 	To understand men's and women's perceptions towards members of LGBTQI+ communities, and their participation in the war effort
Evaluative	Online FGDs	10 discussions with men, women and members of LGBTQI+ communities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudes towards LGBTQI+: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 4 groups with tolerant or neutral attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities – 4 groups with intolerant attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities – 2 groups with members of LGBTQI+ communities • Age: 50% aged 18–35 and 50% aged 36–55 • Viewership: 50% Suspilne viewers 	To collect qualitative feedback from audiences on the films, including understanding their engagement with the films and their understanding of the topics raised
	Neuropsychological research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – participants watched the films wearing equipment that tracked their brain activity and eye movement, and recognised their emotions, and took part in follow-up interviews 	32 participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudes towards LGBTQI+: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 13 with tolerant attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities – 13 with intolerant attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities – 6 members of LGBTQI+ communities • Age: 50% aged 18–35 and 50% aged 36–55 • Gender: 50% men and 50% women • Viewership: 50% Suspilne viewers 	To track participants' engagement with, and response to the films in an objective and directly comparable way

Key findings

How the war has affected LGBTQI+ communities

In qualitative interviews, members of LGBTQI+ communities expressed some of the same key concerns as the broader Ukrainian population in relation to the current war. They were concerned about safety and security, and impacts on mental and physical health, employment and income, and the challenges of relocation for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Qualitative research participants expressed concerns around their **safety and security** in relation to their gender identity or sexual orientation. For example, they discussed being subjected to intense scrutiny and ridicule at military checkpoints – this was particularly highlighted by transgender participants. Similarly, online analysis found that movement within or out of Ukraine was especially challenging when identification documents are required.

Participants also talked about challenges in finding new jobs and homes because of discriminatory attitudes among employers and landlords. When moving to safer locations, many said they felt concerned about negative attitudes towards them in small towns or villages where they might be more visible. As a result, they had chosen to move to bigger cities.

Across the qualitative research, participants outlined the impact of the war on their **mental health** and that they lacked the necessary support to deal with this. In addition, participants and expert interviewees highlighted specific health issues such as the war hampering access to hormone therapy, which is critical for many transgender people.

Lack of legal rights/recognition was also a key issue highlighted by experts and other participants. As Ukraine does not legally recognise same-sex marriage, same-sex families have concerns around their ability to move around or outside the country with their children if only one is legally recognised as the biological parent. Similarly, members of same-sex couples may not have access to their partner's body if they are killed while serving in the military.

 **“ Russian military checked our phones at checkpoints, checked them very meticulously with humiliation because we are LGBTQI+. Everyone I know left Mariupol for these reasons. ”** In-depth interview with LGBTQI+ male IDP, aged 27

LGBTQI+ communities' media habits and representation

In the qualitative research, LGBTQI+ participants discussed their media consumption, information sources and needs. As with the overall Ukrainian population,^d they relied on social and digital media. They also talked about **relying on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for information** and support. For example, a transgender woman talked about how NGOs she had found through Kyiv Pride and Kharkiv Pride had helped her access shelter, food and financial assistance when she fled from Kharkiv.

There were mixed views on the amount of media and communication representations of LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine. LGBTQI+ research participants thought that **media content about them and issues**

^d As explored in our research briefing “Women in Ukraine: How are they using media since the full scale invasion?”, see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/documents/bbc-ukraine-rb2-eng-final.pdf>

related to their communities had been growing slowly before the full-scale invasion. But they and key experts interviewed for this research recognised that most of that content was produced and distributed by NGOs and activists on social media, supported by international donor funding, rather than by mainstream media. One example quoted was a post about LGBTQI+ people fighting in the military that went viral on social media but attracted very limited traditional media coverage.

Experts also discussed the online space being more progressive in bringing challenges faced by LGBTQI+ people, compared to TV, radio and other traditional media. They felt that LGBTQI+ communities had been ignored or treated as 'exotic' by Ukrainian media.

While some LGBTQI+ participants felt that LGBTQI+ issues were sidelined by the media, some LGBTQI+ and non-LGBTQI+ participants felt that this was not the right time to focus on these issues, as the war should be the key focus.

Online analysis also suggests that online conversations and activism have been driving awareness and acceptance of LGBTQI+ people and issues in Ukraine, both in the context of the war and more broadly. However, some online narratives positioned the war as a 'culture war' against a **Russian enemy intolerant of these communities**. Examples of Russian disinformation around LGBTQI+ communities were also highlighted by research participants. For example, one participant talked about having seen Russian propaganda that used derogatory language about gay people serving in the military. He also mentioned online Russian-generated content that cited posters from a LGBTQI+ bar in Mariupol as an example of NATO pro-gay propaganda in Ukraine.^e

“There was probably more attention [paid] to LGBTQI+ [issues] before [the war], probably because of the EU was more engaged with this topic and more funding was going to these efforts. Now, this is not a priority issue... – everything revolves around war.”

In-depth interview with LGBTQI+ female, aged 39

Attitudes towards members of LGBTQI+ communities

There is some **evidence that attitudes to LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine are becoming more positive**.⁷ For example, there are examples of increased political support for same-sex marriage in Ukraine, in opposition to Russia's anti-LGBTQI+ stance.⁸ In the FGDs, non-LGBTQI+ men and women from across Ukraine were grateful for LGBTQI+ people's contributions to the war effort, and younger groups – especially **young women** – expressed support for LGBTQI+ communities and their rights.

LGBTQI+ participants said that they do not want to identify as different from other people. They discussed how they were contributing to the war effort in the same way as everyone else – by donating, crowdfunding, organising assistance for people in need, and even serving in the military. This sense of national unity appears to be driving some acceptance in Ukraine of people from different walks of life. However, upon further investigation it was evident that older men and women held more negative attitudes towards people from LGBTQI+ communities. In addition, **members of LGBTQI+ communities were still highly wary of revealing their LGBTQI+ identity** to others as they feared facing discrimination.

^e In November 2022, Russia's parliament approved a bill that widens a prohibition of 'LGBT propaganda' and restricts the 'demonstration' of LGBT behaviour. Any action or information that is considered an attempt to promote homosexuality – in public, online, or in films, books or advertising – could incur a heavy fine.

Findings from the evaluative FGDs echo this. Participants with intolerant and/or neutral attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities felt that members of LGBTQI+ communities should not be open about their identity, regarding this as self-promotion. However, participants' views were more positive towards equal rights and showed more inclusive attitudes, such as mentioning diversity (see Figure 1).

“ Many LGBTQI+ people do not disclose their orientation because a lot of people in Ukraine are not ready to see who dates who. But I think we will come to this. ” In-depth interview with non-LGBTQI+ female IDP, aged 18–24

Figure 1: Participants' associations with the term LGBTQI+



Q: What comes to your mind when I say LGBTQI+?

Base: Participants of evaluative FGDs with positive/neutral and negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities (n=48).

Aggregated cloud of tags.

Older people tended to have more negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities. They expressed their dislike for people overtly displaying LGBTQI+ 'signs' and 'traits' and felt that public demonstrations of these characteristics (such as public displays of affection between same sex couples) would cause animosity or irritation among wider society. Some expressed views that LGBTQI+ communities were trying to exploit the turmoil of war by advocating for their rights and intensifying their activism. And some voiced concerns that this activism would influence children. Some male participants used derogatory language to describe people from LGBTQI+ communities without seeing this as problematic in any way.

In the nationally representative survey of Ukrainians, 39% of female participants and 30% of male participants said whether they identified as a member of LGBTQI+ communities. Older people were more likely to refuse the question – among women over 55 years of age, 53% refused this question compared to 24% of women aged 18–33. Similarly, 41% of men aged over 55 refused the question, compared to 24% of men aged 18–34.

“ They are like any other persons – they are the same people who live as they live. They have their views. But I do believe that it is absolutely unnecessary to bombard others with it. ” In-depth interview with non-LGBTQI+ female, aged 52

The Visible documentary short film series

Suspilne, Ukraine's public service broadcaster, and a media partner of BBC Media Action, commissioned a documentary short film series to enhance the visibility and civic and political participation of women and members of LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine.^f Under the title Visible, the series profiles 10 Ukrainian women and members of LGBTQI+ communities, and their contributions to the war effort and wider society. The films aim to challenge gender and LGBTQI+ stereotypes, and demonstrate the diverse needs, ideas and issues that these communities face in war-torn Ukraine.

The short films invite audiences to better understand the value of including women and members of LGBTQI+ communities in decision-making in humanitarian response, peace-building and society in general. The 10 stories are first-hand accounts of ordinary people doing extraordinary things and highlighting the diverse and previously invisible heroes in present-day Ukraine.

BBC Media Action worked with Suspilne to help build their capacity to commission such content or to create themselves in the future. Effective practices to ensure success were:

- To have a clear **production concept** outlining who production teams wanted to feature in the films, how they wanted to tell the stories and what they wanted audiences to feel and understand. 'Moving the audiences from their heads to their hearts' when telling the stories was a guiding principle throughout the production. BBC Media Action together with Suspilne developed the concept at the onset of the project and involved the project partner NDI ensuring input from all project stakeholders, considering the Ukrainian context and specifically the current context of the war.
- To think about how to avoid stereotypes and further discrimination, as the films featured members of marginalised communities. With Suspilne and project partner NDI, **do-no-harm approaches** were considered, relevant to the Ukrainian context, to make sure the films would not 'exoticise' LGBTQI+ people or portray them as victims. For the content to be inclusive, discussions highlighted how important it was to feature LGBTQI+ people as ordinary citizens who happen to identify as LGBTQI+ and to focus on their actions instead of their sexual or gender identity. It was also important to produce content that focused on what connects people instead of portraying LGBTQI+ people as a distinct group in society.
- To **closely work together** with Suspilne from production concept stage, throughout production and release of the films. Weekly meetings were held to discuss the production progress, including the selection of protagonists, film scripts, filming schedules, first cuts and the final film versions. The regular meetings also served to discuss any challenges and above all to build the team and the enthusiasm for the films.
- To build **training and mentoring** for Suspilne into the entire production process. Trainings took into account Suspilne's existing capacities and strengths and was tailored to specific needs and interests of the production team. Trainings were also aligned with the different production stages, for example towards the end of the production and closer to release, BBC Media Action provided trainings on promotion and release strategies. BBC Media Action also worked with a production mentor, who was an integral part of the team offering advice and feedback on scripts and the film cuts, while contributing to building the confidence of the production team in making editorial decisions.
- To work with a **dedicated team at Suspilne** and to build on Suspilne's remit as public service broadcaster to represent the diversity of society. The strong commitment and enthusiasm of the media partner was key in the success of the film production and release, including the production of additional social media material to promote the films, the production and release of a TV version of the short films as well as the organisation of a film launch event in Kyiv.

^f The series was designed to complement NDI's work on the civic and political participation of women and LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine, by sparking mainstream discussion on the value of including these groups in decision-making.

The films were released in August 2023 on *Suspilne*'s YouTube channel, [Suspilne Kultura](#). The evaluative research covered four of these films that portray members of LGBTQI+ communities (see Table 2).

Table 2: The four *Visible* films included in the evaluative research

Main character/s	Film description and communication objective
<u>Vlad S</u> , director of a charitable fund and a humanitarian volunteer	<p>Despite being bullied from childhood for his sexual orientation and appearance, Vlad S helps others. He has provided humanitarian aid to families since the beginning of the war.</p> <p>The film aims to highlight LGBTQI+ people's positive contributions to humanitarian response and society, and to help audiences to see beyond people's gender identity or sexual orientation.</p>
<u>Pavlo and Vlad</u> , a couple serving in the armed forces	<p>Pavlo and Vlad are engaged to be married. They want to officially register their marriage, and dream of raising children together.</p> <p>The film aims to demonstrate the diverse nature of society, and the fact that like everyone else, LGBTQI+ people are affected by the war and have dreams for when it is over.</p>
<u>Lesya</u> , a military drone operator	<p>From the age of 12, Lesya has felt out of place in her body. The film outlines how and why she dared to change gender after joining the military.</p> <p>The film aims to highlight LGBTQI+ people's involvement in the military effort and their contributions to Ukraine's future. It shows that transgender people have the same hopes and dreams as other people and should receive equal treatment.</p>
<u>Maria</u> , author of a draft law on civil partnerships	<p>Maria recognised her sexual orientation in adulthood, after being engaged to a man. The film covers her progress from being silent and shy about LGBTQI+ issues to writing a draft law on civil partnerships for a government team.</p> <p>The film aims to show the importance of equal rights for everyone in society, and women's political leadership in enabling this.</p>

Audience engagement with, and understanding of, the films

Participants found the films **engaging** and perceived the protagonists and their stories positively. Findings from the neuropsychological research methods suggested that, overall, the films generated an above-average emotional response compared to typical Ukrainian data.⁹ This indicates a high level of interest

⁹ Typical Ukrainian data for media products (mostly TV series of Ukrainian production) shows an average emotional intensity of 9.51. For the tested *Visible* films, an average emotional intensity of 21.24 was registered.

from all groups of participants, irrespective of age, sex and previous views towards LGBTQI+ communities. However, responses differed depending on the protagonists and the story of each film.

The films generated tolerant discussions among research participants. In general, the FGDs served as an example of mature and tolerant discussions, dispelling LGBTQI+ stereotypes and entrenched social norms. In the group discussions, participants with a previously neutral attitude towards LGBTQI+ communities tended to side with LGBTQI+ communities and their rights whenever they heard intolerant or offensive stereotypical statements from other participants, mainly those with negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ individuals.

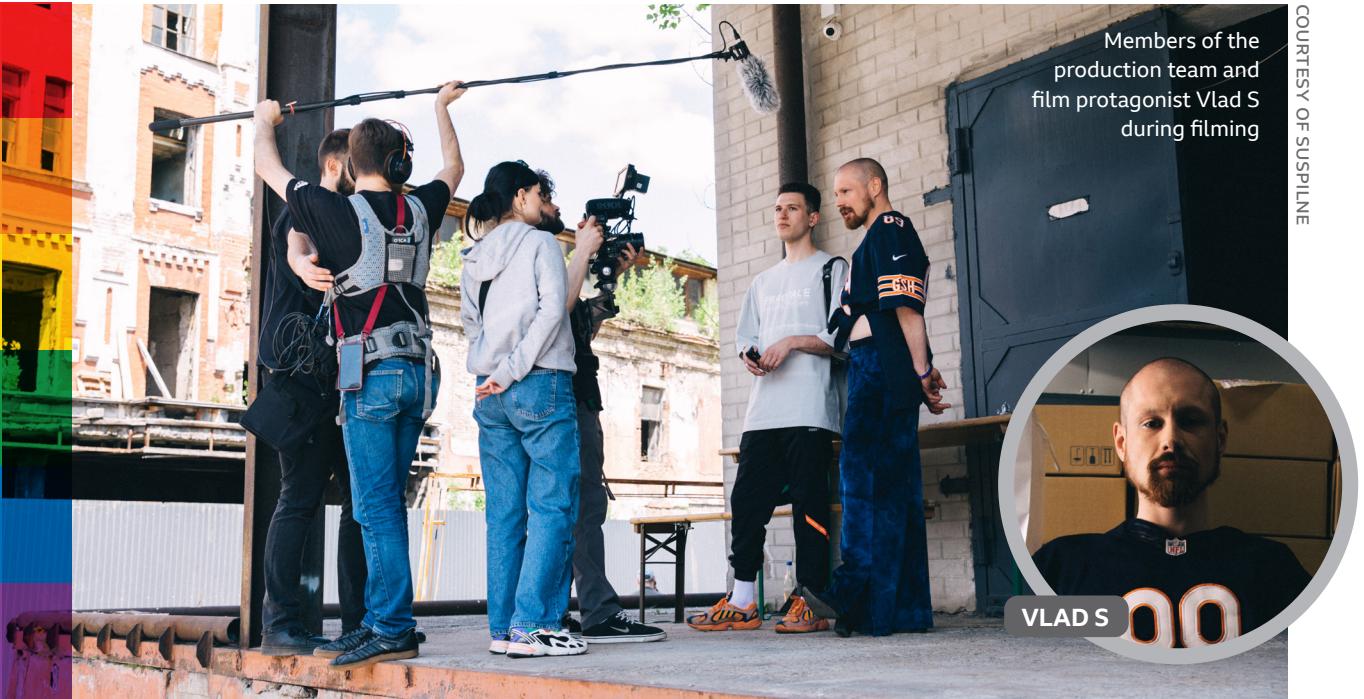
The stories helped to normalise the lives of LGBTQI+ individuals by raising awareness of, and showcasing, the issues they face. The films helped participants become more aware of, and articulate their attitudes about, phenomena such as intolerance towards LGBTQI+ communities.



For example, participants from all FGDs grasped the need to change attitudes towards transgender individuals after watching Lesya's film, and they accepted that not all transgender individuals are 'provocative'. Lesya's story highlighted common struggles for transgender individuals, such as overcoming surgery, facing rejection from their families and society, and often facing insults and misunderstandings in public. The film also highlighted that the Ukrainian military 'protects' women but not transgender women serving in the army.

Vlad S' story also generated high levels of interest, sympathy and emotion among research participants. The story helped many FGD participants experience emotional catharsis because Vlad S is accepted by his family and respected by his colleagues. Most of the FGD participants now understand the positive contributions that LGBTQI+ people are making to Ukrainian society. The film also raised awareness about the difficulties gay individuals and those who are visibly different face in society.

Emotions played a strong role in people's engagement in the films. Both FGD and neuropsychological research participants displayed varying emotional responses to the different films, which influenced their levels of interest in the films.



The findings highlighted differences in the role of emotion between different audience groups:

- **Male participants displayed high levels of emotional involvement in the films**, rivalling or surpassing that of females. Men were more engaged in watching the films, and the films elicited stronger reactions from them. The most significant difference in perception related to the film about Vlad S – overall, it was women's favourite film but men's least favourite, primarily due to their emotional reaction to the story, as men felt uncomfortable with Vlad S being flamboyant.
- The neuropsychological methods found **higher levels of interest and engagement in the films among research participants with intolerant views towards LGBTQI+ communities**, compared to those with tolerant views. Despite their high levels of interest and engagement, participants with less tolerant views towards members of LGBTQI+ communities also exhibited negative emotions while viewing the films, primarily sorrow. In contrast, participants with tolerant views showed less interest but experienced positive emotions while watching the stories, except for Lesya's.
- Older neuropsychological research participants (aged 36–55) had a more favourable attitude towards the films' stories. They expressed more interest in the films and perceived all bar Vlad S' story positively. **Younger audiences (aged 18–35) were less interested in, and more critical of, the films.** Younger audience members were only positive about Pavlo and Vlad's story, while the others received neutral or negative reactions. This trend was reflected among FGD participants – older participants gave softer opinions regarding LGBTQI+ communities after watching the films and were more tolerant towards neutral or supportive views to LGBTQI+ rights.
- **Among younger participants, there is an apparent difference between the progressive views and attitudes they described holding during interviews and their neuropsychological reactions.** In the neuropsychological data, younger participants were more critical than older participants. Younger participants showed low empathy and compassion, and more contempt, towards the films' protagonists. This suggests that their voiced opinions may be learned views that are accepted in society, rather than products of their own deliberation or perception.

The films have increased awareness and generated empathy.



COURTESY OF SUSPILNE

These four films heightened awareness of, and interest in, LGBTQI+ individuals' lives.

People's responses show that media content needs to be sustained to affect real change. When asked about rights, they empathised with Pavlo and Vlad, Vlad S and Lesya but did not agree that they should have families or inherit property from same sex partners. Interestingly, FGD participants were more tolerant towards Lesya raising children in a LGBTQI+ family, perhaps in part due to her military background which they commended.

Analysis of the neuropsychological data reveals that the least tolerant participants view the protagonists first and foremost as ordinary people, feel their pain, and are compassionate about their aspirations. They also demonstrated negative reactions towards certain aspects of the films, such as demonstrations of intimacy (as in Pavlo and Vlad's story), actions to normalise LGBTQI+ communities (as in Vlad S' story), and the topic of LGBTQI+ families adopting children (as in Pavlo and Vlad's, and Lesya's stories). This shows that the films have made the first steps in increasing awareness and building empathy, and shows that media should continue to showcase LGBTQI+ people to shift attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities.

LGBTQI+ participants' perspectives on the films

Perhaps unsurprisingly, LGBTQI+ participants' views on the films differed slightly from those of other participants. They particularly **liked the films' positive portrayal of the courage and confidence of various LGBTQI+ individuals**. For example, they felt that Maria's character fosters understanding and respect whereas non-LGBTQI+ participants found her story confusing. They also liked Pavlo and Vlad's story as the issues they faced were common, and their characters were not stereotypical. However, LGBTQI+ participants expressed concerns over some story elements which they felt were stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQI+ individuals, such as Vlad S' story.



COURTESY OF SUSPLINE

Members of the production team and film protagonist Maria and allies during filming

LGBTQI+ individuals self-censor in front of non-LGBTQI+ people. For example, LGBTQI+ participants felt that Ukrainian society is not ready for scenes such as Pavlo and Vlad hugging and discussing having children together.

Recommendations for media and communication initiatives

The Visible films analysed as part of this research generated empathy with the protagonists and their stories. They also raised awareness about members of LGBTQI+ communities' lives, ideas and contributions to Ukrainian society, including the war effort. As such, the research shows that this type of content has the potential to increase awareness, generate empathy, stimulate discussion and shift attitudes, thereby contributing to greater acceptance of LGBTQI+ communities in Ukraine. Media can help to shift views by increasing the representation of LGBTQI+ communities, changing how these communities are portrayed and by showcasing the diverse contributions that LGBTQI+ people are making to Ukrainian society.

Shifting attitudes towards marginalised groups requires repeated work over time to ensure they are accepted, and treated equally. This includes raising the importance of LGBTQI+ rights and showcasing that it is not acceptable for LGBTQI+ people to be treated differently. Encouragingly, younger participants felt that they should voice public support for these rights in a group setting showing that in public they should be more supportive, even though individually they were less progressive in their views.

The following recommendations, based on the research findings, aim to help media and communication increase the visibility of LGBTQI+ communities, and support more inclusive attitudes towards these communities.

- **Content diversification:** Most existing content about people from LGBTQI+ communities and the issues they face is limited to social media and created by NGOs. Traditional media (TV and radio) need to showcase these communities, specifically how the war is affecting them. These platforms are more likely to reach people aged over 55, who demonstrate less progressive attitudes to LGBTQI+ communities. Media partners should be supported to develop content addressing these issues and journalists should be supported to put content representing LGBTQI+ communities on the agenda.
- **Content framing:** Media content which focuses on LGBTQI+ communities and issues needs to be framed in an engaging and influential way.
 - **Equality:** For example, focusing on the importance of equality among all Ukrainians, rather than highlighting the plight of a minority, could build on the country's current strong sense of national unity. People with more negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities may be put off by any content that explicitly aims to portray or promote LGBTQI+ issues but may engage with content focusing on the importance of equal rights, justice and tolerance.
 - **Relatable shared experience:** Content should be relatable and cover topics that speak to the audience's own experiences to create empathy and foster understanding. Content should also show LGBTQI+ people together with non-LGBTQI+ people, to highlight members of LGBTQI+ communities as part of society rather than as isolated individuals.
 - **Storytelling:** Content relating to LGBTQI+ communities should aim to portray high quality and engaging human stories focused on individuals without explicitly focusing on their LGBTQI+ status. To have a positive influence on social attitudes, media content should normalise people's sexual orientation or gender identity rather than making it a central part of the story.
- **Engaging young people:** Content should focus on engaging and attracting young people. It should also build young people's knowledge of LGBTQI+ communities and increase opportunities to interact, such as discussions to allow young people to reflect on their own views more. Using formats and channels based on their media habits, content should address underlying negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities young people might have and dispel related stereotypes, beliefs or concerns. Content should showcase what equal rights mean in everyday life and for a society.
- **Content over time:** Translating awareness and empathy into holding more positive attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities takes time. In order to help create support for, and shift attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities, related content should be long running and across multiple platforms. This could be through the production of ongoing series which leverages the Visible brand and through supporting media practitioners and media outlets to produce their own content representing LGBTQI+ communities positively.

Endnotes

¹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2022) *Ukraine: Protection of LGBTI and gender-diverse refugees remains critical – UN expert*. Press release 22 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/ukraine-protection-lgbt-and-gender-diverse-refugees-remains-critical-un>

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³ BBC News, 12 July 2022, *Ukraine to consider legalising same-sex marriage amid war*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-62134804> and Equaldex (2022) *LGBT Rights in Ukraine*. Available at: <https://www.equaldex.com/region/Ukraine>

⁴ Graham-Harrison, E and Mzhulin, A (2023) *War brings urgency to fight for LGBT rights in Ukraine*. The Guardian, 5 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/05/war-brings-urgency-to-fight-for-lgbt-rights-in-ukraine>

⁵ National Democratic Institute (2023) *NDI January 2023 poll: Opportunities and challenges facing Ukraine’s democratic transition*, page 12. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-january-2023-poll-opportunities-and-challenges-facing-ukraines-democratic>

⁶ Ibid., page 15

⁷ Serhan, H (2023) *How Putin Inadvertently Boosted Support for LGBT Rights in Ukraine*. Time, 21 April. Available at: <https://time.com/6273445/putin-lgbt-rights-ukraine-russia/>

⁸ Graham-Harrison, E and Mzhulin, A (2023) *War brings urgency to fight for LGBT rights in Ukraine*. The Guardian, 5 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/05/war-brings-urgency-to-fight-for-lgbt-rights-in-ukraine>

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