

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Queer generativity in lesbian, gay, and bisexual older adults: Personal, relational, and political/social behaviours

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## Abstract

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) older adults may have had the opportunity to reflect on and process stressful life experiences, and they may be more inclined to practice queer generative behaviours aimed at strengthening sexual minority identities and supporting the sexual minority community. The present study explored the unique patterns of generativity practiced by 27 Italian LGB older adults (60 years and older) through semi-structured interviews. Using a constructive grounded theory approach, we identified three main forms of queer generativity: (a) *personal*, involving the reception of generativity from others, the redefinition of religious values, and adjustment to parenting styles according to one's LGB identity, motivated by a desire for personal growth; (b) *relational*, involving the provision of resources and the pursuit of a career that supports the LGBT+ community, motivated by a desire to care for others; and (c) *political/social*, involving the creation of new LGBT+ contexts and the transmission of knowledge and experiences to younger LGBT+ persons and allies, motivated by a desire to fight for LGBT+ rights. Queer generativity emerged as a community resilience strategy practiced by LGB older adults to cope with heterosexist and/or ageist social contexts. Implications for policy and community practice are discussed.

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**KEYWORDS**

generativity, LGB, LGBT+ community, older adults, queer, resilience

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) older adults are increasingly being recognized as a sexual minority subgroup with specific characteristics (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). On the one hand, they are considered the first LGB ageing generation, with unique concerns that have resulted from ageing within a large heterosexist and ageist society, such as isolation, a lack of family ties, and discriminatory nursing homes (Grossman, D'Augelli, & O'Connell, 2001; Johnson, Jackson, Arnette, & Koffman, 2005; Rosati, Pistella, & Baiocco, 2020). On the other hand, these many life stressors, if reflected on and processed, may enable LGB older adults to develop a resilient identity, which is a relevant condition for generativity (Hash & Rogers, 2013; Kimmel, 2015).

Resilience is fundamental for sexual minorities because it can buffer the effect of minority stress and reduce or prevent negative health outcomes (Baiocco et al., 2021; Masten, 2007; Meyer, 2003). While individual resilience refers to a set of personal qualities, community-based resilience describes how a particular community (e.g., the community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minority persons; LGBT+) supports individual members in promoting their own well-being (Meyer, 2015). While there are some factors that promote community-based resilience within the entire LGBT+ population (e.g., LGBT+ support networks, a sense of belonging to the LGBT+ community; Baiocco et al., 2018; Riggle & Rostosky, 2011), other factors are subgroup-specific (e.g., being 'out', for sexual minority youth; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015).

Moreover, not all the LGBT+ subgroups are visible and recognized at the same level, and some subgroups may feel isolated and/or experience stigma within the same LGBT+ community. For instance, bisexual people are often erased by both heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities (Ross et al., 2018), transgender people experience specific stigma, which encourages them to create communities kept together by gender identity issues (Testa, Jimenez, & Rankin, 2014), and LGBT+ people of color are systematically underrepresented (Ghabrial, 2017). The predominant image of LGBT+ representations is still that of a young, white, handsome, stereotypically healthy—preferably cis male—adult, thus invisibilizing all the other subjectivities falling outside these criteria (e.g., lesbian, transgender, black, disabled, and older people). Consequently, being old is an additional marginalized category for sexual minorities, requiring specific community-based resilience strategies. Previous studies identified generativity as a potentially significant resilience factor characterizing LGB older adults (Bower, Lewis, Bermúdez, & Singh, 2019; Emler, Tozay, & Raveis, 2011).

The concept of *generativity* was introduced by Erikson (1959) to define the impulse to establish and guide the next generations, to ensure their well-being; it is typically enacted in middle and older adulthood (Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Slater, 2003). Generativity may manifest through different practices, such as parenting, caring for others, social activism, teaching and mentoring, and striving to leave a legacy (Kotre, 1984; McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992). These generative behaviours have been found to strongly influence individuals' well-being as they age (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moskowitz, 2000; Melo, Novo, & de Vries, 2008), and to contribute to successful ageing (Schoklitsch & Baumann, 2012).

John Kotre (1984) considered generativity as a process embedded within a cultural context characterizing the entire life course. He distinguished between communal generativity, consisting of nurturing, caring for, and connecting with other people, and agentic generativity, aimed at extending, strengthening, and affirming the self. Specifically, Kotre identified four main types of generativity: (a) biological, which concerns all the actions required to take care of children; (b) parental, which is oriented to the education of children; (c) technical, which is accomplished by

teachers when passing skills to their students; and (d) cultural, which occurs when teachers transmit the meaning of ideas and notions to their students.

On the basis of Kotre's theory, McAdams and de St Aubin (1992) deepened the concept of generativity by describing it as motivated by both inner desire—an internal drive to gain power and connection with others—and cultural demand—external forces that encourage to pursue normative adult roles of care. According to the authors, generativity may consist of creating things, maintaining the things created, offering one's self or belonging, supporting next generations, and leaving a legacy. Moreover, they see generativity as composed of different features—for example, desire, demand, concern, belief, commitment, action, and narration—whose importance may vary depending on age spans (e.g., desire is more salient for younger people, whereas narration for older adults).

Despite generativity is not necessarily about begetting and kinship, the dominant narratives around such concept are that of cis/heterosexual people and families. This may depend on the fact that the classical psychological theories are anchored to a cis/heteronormative perspective, by leaving out LGBT+ people and their families. Even if sexual minority issues are increasingly considered in psychological research, the cornerstones of psychological theories were developed in historical periods characterized by the absence of sexual minorities in the public scene, thus requiring updating to be applied to interpret and represent current societal features. Moreover, despite the increasing visibility of the LGBT+ people, some aspects still are controversial and sensitive (often resulting in proper taboos), such as the possibility for LGBT+ adults to become parents, as well as to be teachers and educators while being open about their sexual identity. Due to this persisting stigma, LGBT+ people have never been thinkable and described as generative adults.

## 2 | THE PRESENT STUDY

Efforts made by LGB persons to create, reinforce, and provide continuity to the LGBT+ community—and thereby increase community resilience strategies and counter the burden of oppression—may be motivated by concerns around generativity (Meyer, 2015). For LGB older adults, generativity could represent a strategy to give visibility, value, and continuity to one's existence through successive generations. However, despite the growth in psychological research exploring LGB older adults, there remains a lack of evidence on the particular resilience resources (e.g., generativity) that distinguish this population.

Oswald and Masciadrelli (2008) introduced the concept of *queer generativity* to refer to specific generative rituals used by sexual minorities to promote social inclusion and creatively use the difference to redress potential exclusion. Their findings suggested that lesbian and gay people's motives for acting generatively are mainly based on inner desire rather than cultural demands (McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992). If inserted within nonconformist positive social environments (activist and friends' networks), sexual minorities may transform their non-normative process of identity development into an opportunity to question social expectations and mandates, thus developing an internal desire of taking charge of others regardless of blood ties. Thus, their acts of generativity may differ from normative developmental tasks, such as raising children and be more oriented to nurturing and guiding other (e.g., younger) sexual minority people. Queer generativity may subvert (cis/hetero)normativity, and it is typically expressed when sexual minorities address their concerns for their community by creating new LGBT+ spaces, bringing LGBT+ concerns to the public arena, and actively participating in LGBT+ public rituals.

In Italy, LGB people still face heterosexism in several contexts, such as school (Nappa, Palladino, Menesini, & Baiocco, 2018), sports (Pistella et al., 2020), and family (Baiocco et al., 2016). For instance, there is no current legislation to protect people from homophobic harassment and discrimination, and there is little or no visibility of LGB subjectivities and relationships in many institutions (Baiocco & Pistella, 2019). This is particularly true for Italian LGB older adults, who grew up in an even more hostile context, which depleted them of traditional family ties, attracted stigma from their religious community, and excluded them from welfare policies (Rosati et al., 2020; Rosati, Pistella, Ioverno, & Baiocco, 2018). After the criminal prosecution of homosexual conducts perpetrated by the Fascist

Regime, the beginning of the Republican system in 1946 did not result in the introduction of dispositions specifically protecting LGB people from discrimination. The approach adopted from that moment on was rather of denial and invisibilization: in this respect, the Italian Constitution does not explicitly protect sexual minorities; it instead establishes the protection of human dignity, the principle of equality, and the commitment to international and EU legal obligations which have increasingly included the contrast to discriminations on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. In practice, forms of discrimination and harassment against LGB people continued being reported, especially targeting public expressions and visibility of homosexuality.

The LGBT+ movement in Italy started emerging in the 1970s and was mostly characterized by the organization into small groups of activists and the affiliation to radical-left political orientation. In 1978, the first public demonstrations occurred, in continuity with gay-pride parades organized in other European countries. The general political disengagement of the 1980s also concerned LGBT+ activism. In this period, grassroots activist groups were outpaced by the first LGBT+ organizations, advocating for establishing alliances with institutional actors and promoting inclusion and integration policies. During this same period, the HIV/AIDS crisis represented a driving force of mobilization for the LGBT+ movement, also due to the stigma affecting this disease—that was closely connected, in the public opinion, to some of the most marginalized social groups, such as LGBT+ people, sex workers, drug addicts, and so on—and to the lack of comprehensive prevention public measures to tackle the virus propagation. A specific remark must be made concerning the lesbian movement, which mostly developed in the framework of the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s, gaining an independent and specific identity and cooperating only randomly with the gay movement.

Eventually, the 1990s were characterized by the increasing visibility of the LGBT+ movement, publicly advocating for civil rights, including same-sex marriage, which was not legally allowed until 2016. Due to this increased visibility, during the '1990s the expressions of public condemnation of LGB conduct on the Vatican and Catholic authorities' part relevantly grew and strengthened. Nevertheless, the general climate of denial and invisibilization suffered by LGB people until the 1990s may have stimulated them to create communities to oppose stigma and develop resilience skills (Kimmel, 2015).

The present study aimed at expanding our understanding of queer generativity in the ageing population by investigating generative behaviours in a group of Italian LGB older adults. Given the potential differences from the general population in the normative stages of the life cycle (e.g., due to a lack of descendants and connections with one's family of origin), we intended to explore the unique aspects of generativity produced by the LGB older population by considering queer generativity a community resilience strategy (Meyer, 2015).

## 3 | METHOD

### 3.1 | Participants and procedure

LGB persons aged 60 years and older were invited to participate in the research. Recruitment was carried out through convenience sampling technique whereby an information flyer about the study was distributed via the personal acquaintances of the first author/lead interviewer, online instruments (e.g., social media), and LGBT+ venues (e.g., bars, bookshops, and activist/organization centers). Data collection occurred between October 2018 and October 2019. A total of 27 cisgender LGB adults in the age range of 60–75 years ( $M = 65.15$ ;  $SD = 4.25$ ) took part in the study (14 women, 13 men). Participants' recruitment ended with theoretical saturation, which was achieved when adding interviews did not provide further properties to the theoretical category we identified. Specifically, following the theoretical sampling method, we first developed a core category while conducting interviews, then we started extracting codes by reasoning on them, and, finally, we returned to the field to gather additional data to check and refine our tentative interpretations (Charmaz, 2008).

All participants were White and Italian; nearly half (48%) were religious, and more than half (56%) were members of an LGBT+ organization. Fifteen participants (56%) were single, whereas among those with a partner (44%), five

(18%) were in a civil union, and three (11%) were married. Seven participants (26%) had children. As per the participants' residential status, most (89%) resided in a metropolitan area; 10 (37%) lived alone, 10 (37%) lived with their partner, 2 (7%) lived with their children, 1 (4%) lived with their parents, and 4 (15%) lived with friends or siblings. The level of education varies among participants, from a bachelor, specialist, or PhD degree (63%) to high school (33%) or middle school (4%) diploma. Concerning the employment status, most participants (60%) were retired, seven (26%) were employed, two (7%) were unemployed, and two (7%) had a disability pension.

Before taking part in the study, participants were informed about the general content the research intended to investigate, as well as the average time required for each step, and were asked to sign the consent form. The protocols for conducting the research were approved by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Developmental and Social Psychology of the Sapienza University of Rome. Participants first completed an online questionnaire that was designed to collect demographic information; following this, they took part in an individual semi-structured interview, which lasted—on average—60 min. Most of the interviews were conducted by the first author, with the exception of a few that were administered by two experienced psychologists who were trained in the study protocol.

### 3.2 | Instrument for data gathering

The present study used the interview protocol from the 'Generations Study' (Frost et al., 2019; study details and interview schedule are available at [www.generations-study.com](http://www.generations-study.com))—an ongoing longitudinal study aimed at exploring identity development, stress, coping, and health in different generations of LGB people in the United States. The qualitative protocol considers the entire life span and contains essential questions about the impact of social change on the lived experience of sexual minorities. For this reason, it results particularly suitable to describe in-depth the trajectories of the formation of sexual identity and the exposure to minority stress and resilience in specific sexual minority cohorts, such as older adults.

The interview is composed of eight sections, which progressively move from unstructured to more specific content-focused questions through the integration of multiple epistemologies and methods: (a) in the *lifeline drawing* section, participants represented and analysed their entire life; (b) in the *life story* section, participants were asked to talk about their first memory, a high point in their life, a low point in their life, and a turning point; (c) the *identity mapping* is aimed at eliciting the different social identities of participants (e.g., sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, professional status, socioeconomic condition, etc.) and their intersectional experiences; (d) the *sex and sexual cultures* section contains more specific questions about participants' sex life and relationships; (e) the *challenges, stress, and coping* section investigates participants' life challenges and the way they handled such challenges, thus exploring resilience aspects; (f) the *social and historical change* section analyses participants' interpretations of the cultural shift including the representations of sexual minority people and issues; (g) the *healthcare utilization* section contains specific questions about experiences of seeking and receiving care related to mental and physical health; and (h) the *reflections and goals* section helps participants imagining future, and ending the interview in a positive discussion. For the present study, all eight sections of the interview protocol were translated and adapted to the Italian context by the authors.

### 3.3 | Analytical approach

To analyse the qualitative content of participants' narratives, the research team adopted a constructive grounded theory (CGT; Charmaz, 2014) approach. According to this perspective, participants' points of view were represented as co-constructions of meaning situated in a given cultural context, in which the positionalities of both researcher and participant were crucial. The present authors differ in their identities (relating to, e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation, academic position), and thus represent diverse positionalities. The research group is composed of also gay, lesbian,

heterosexual cisgender, and non-binary queer psychologists, having a consolidated experience in the LGBTQ+ research area. All authors share a White and Italian ethnic identity, and some have a queer activist background.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo version 12 Plus. The entire textual analysis corpus was composed of 208.779 words. Guided by a CGT approach, the coding process started with data gathering without having preconceived constructs or theories to verify (Charmaz, 1996, 2008). During the data collection, the first author/lead interviewer of this study realized that several aspects of optimal functioning and adaptation emerged from participants' narratives, representing at times the main content of the interview. To respect the 'creation of analytic codes and categories developed from data, not from preconceived hypotheses' (Charmaz, 1996, p. 28), the focus of the research interest gradually switched from the negative effects of LGB older adults' life challenges to the positive resolution of such challenges, typically resulting in resilience (Meyer, 2015).

Consequently, for the present study, the data analysis started with the aim of identifying the resilience aspects that would best represent the older generation of sexual minorities. Coding was conducted simultaneously with literature on LGBTQ+ ageing population's resilience aspects. The concept of generativity gradually emerged as particularly suitable to describe older adults' optimal adaptation strategies to both ageing and sexual minority status. Once generativity as a potential core category was identified, we re-coded the extracts, eliminating those extracts that did not fit the concept of generativity and redefining those that fitted in the model in new code categories.

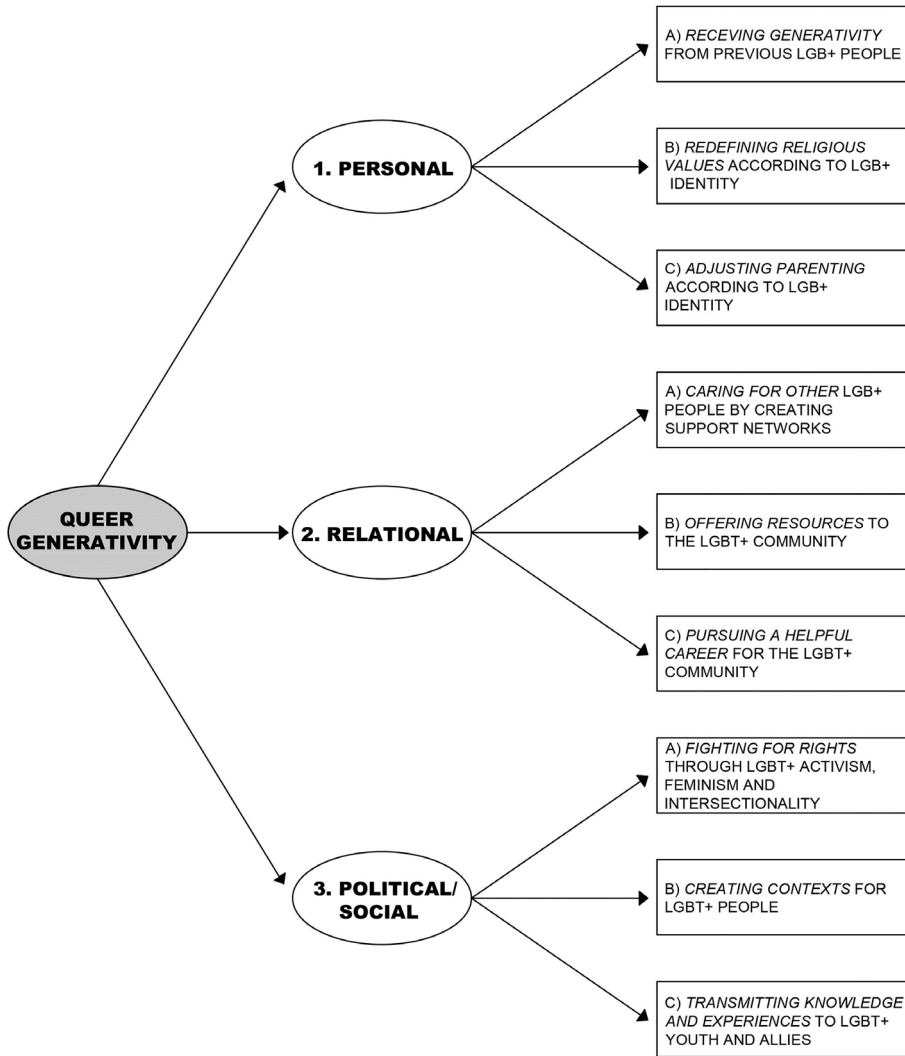
Specifically, data analysis followed six main steps: (a) the first and third authors independently *open-coded* the same five transcripts by identifying and coding such quotations which were perceived as more significant to represent resilience aspects; (b) the same authors compared the identified codes and created a set of shared categories (e.g., generativity, visibility, agency, and belonging to the LGBTQ+ community), to orient the analysis of the remaining transcripts (33 codes; 538 quotations); (c) the second and fourth authors assessed the salience of the categories and the accuracy of the codes by directly analysing the selected extracts; (d) all authors discussed (over several meetings) the categories and identified 'generativity' as the *core category*, as it was felt to be particularly representative of participants' positionality; (e) the first and third authors re-coded the extracts, where necessary, using a *focused coding* procedure, until the core category and related concepts achieved *theoretical saturation* (13 codes, 140 quotations; Charmaz, 2008); and (f) additional discussions involving the members of the research teams allowed to redefine the new codes in the final theoretical structure concerning the concept of queer generativity.

## 4 | RESULTS

Participants' generativity narratives mainly referred to actions aimed at recognizing and strengthening LGBTQ+ identities and supporting the LGBTQ+ community, defined as *queer generativity*. Considering the motivations for and consequences of participants' actions, we identified three main forms of queer generativity (Figure 1): (a) *personal*, motivated by a desire for personal growth in relation to LGB and parental identity; (b) *relational*, motivated by caring for others (e.g., the creation of LGB support networks and the provision of tangible and intangible resources to the LGB community); and (c) *political/social*, motivated by a desire to make a meaningful impact on society and the LGBTQ+ community.

### 4.1 | Personal queer generativity

Participants reported several strategies to achieve a sense of comfort with their sexual identity. First, most ( $n = 12$ ) recognized the fundamental role played by the nascent LGBTQ+ culture and community in supporting their identity formation. We defined the practice of engaging with this community a subdimension of generativity called *receiving*



**FIGURE 1** Queer generative behaviours performed at a personal, relational, and political/social level

generativity (1a, Figure 1), because it enabled participants to be accompanied by other generative LGB people, either directly (via relationships) or indirectly (via culture):

What helped me was culture, and to be part of a certain kind of environment. Because a safe environment strengthens you, by helping you to become aware that you're not alone, that you can count on lesbian and gay friends, and then you can come out. This helped me a lot, to read and know that being homosexual is not an illness but something natural, and no one can condemn you, either from an ethical or a social or religious point of view. (68-Year-old Baptist Protestant gay man)

Another aspect of personal growth involved *redefining religious values* (1b, Figure 1). Participants (n = 5) used this as a strategy to cope with the sexual stigma conveyed by religious institutions:

I fell into a deep crisis of faith that pushed me to look for alternative religious environments. I met a circle of theology where there was a very open-minded priest and I confided with him about all my

“homosexual retching” and guilty feelings. He transmitted me an image of a welcoming God, open to accepting diversities. That was a great moment for me. (69-Year-old Catholic single gay man)

The final personal subdimension of queer generativity concerned *adjusting parenting* (1c, Figure 1), which participants practiced when explaining LGBT+ issues to their children and protecting them from heteronormativity. Seven participants (four women and three men) had children; six of these had children from previous heterosexual marriages, while one gay man had procreated with a female friend using artificial insemination. Parental queer generativity was not directly connected to the biological aspect of parenting, but to acts of loving and raising children, as well as accompanying them as they developed their understanding of sexual minority identity and relationships:

Since he [the child] was born he saw me sleeping with my partner, and when he was 5 he asked me why I used to sleep with him, and I answered, “Because we love each other.” He always felt free to ask me and I was there to answer. (67-Year-old bisexual man with a son born through medical assisted procreation in a consensual non-romantic relationship with a woman)

Parental queer generativity also comprised acts aimed at protecting children, as demonstrated by the following extract:

I went to that priest who knew my story and who preferred I didn't go to my son's holy communion, so I told him that I would go because my son wanted me there. He said that he couldn't give the communion to me, so I said, “Okay, then I come, and you tell me in front of everyone that you can't give it to me.” “Well so you put me in a bad position,” he argued, and at the end he had to accept. (60-Year-old Catholic lesbian woman, mother of three children)

## 4.2 | Relational queer generativity

Relational queer generativity can manifest as a predisposition to *caring for others* (2a, Figure 1), typically by creating LGBT support networks ( $n = 8$ ). For these participants, relational queer generative strategies were fundamental in helping them face the isolation that had resulted from their LGB or HIV+ status, as indicated in the following two extracts:

I know that I can count on a network of lesbian friends that I built, which has already proven supportive when one of us had problems. It seems bad to say but I think I built it precisely because I didn't have a family. (61-Year-old single lesbian woman without children)

When my partner got sick with AIDS it was 1992 and the fate was already sealed because there were no treatments. However, we were lucky enough to have a large family, by which I mean gay friends who were really close and gave us enormous support. This kind of informal care has done a lot. We created communities around our sick friends. (67-Year-old seropositive gay man)

Often, these LGBT support networks included trusted mental, physical, and sexual health specialists, who were able to offer safe clinical settings:

We had a dermatologist friend, a proctologist, some specialists in STIs—all trusted persons. So, when other LGB people were in need, we knew where to send them. (67-Year-old seropositive bisexual man)



Relational queer generativity was also evident in participants' ( $n = 4$ ) acts of *offering resources* (2b, Figure 1) to the community, such as time and/or money:

I am part of the LGBT+ community and so—as an expert, researcher, and activist—I am always available for any kind of initiative in the field, such as this interview. (66-Year-old gay man, doctor)

I recently took part in this contest—“Show XXX”—where I won an award. I donated the entire amount to a shelter for LGBT+ youth. (68-Year-old activist gay man)

Finally, relational queer generativity also occurred when participants ( $n = 10$ ) undertook a particular profession guided by a generative desire (e.g., psychotherapist, pediatrician, and counsellor), or when their profession primarily served the LGBT+ community (e.g., journalist/researcher on LGBT+ issues). These participants were thus *pursuing a helpful career* (2c, Figure 1) for other LGB people:

There's a reason why I am a pediatrician, because I said, “I will never have children, so I will at least bring up the children of others” [...] I've always tried to help others—to offer my wounds of the past, once worked out, to help someone who feels bad. That is why I chose a helping profession. (68-Year-old gay man specializing in both pediatrics and psychotherapy)

People tell me that I am a welcoming person. I am an HIV+ counsellor [...] and I often direct my patients to other LGB specialists when they ask me for that. (60-Year-old activist lesbian woman)

While participants who were journalists or researchers gave visibility to LGBT+ issues through their work, participants who were helping professionals integrated LGB themes into their work and were often a reference point for the LGBT+ community.

### 4.3 | Political and social queer generativity

In general, political and social queer generativity aims at positively contributing to society and the LGBT+ community. Political engagement is mainly characteristic of young/middle adulthood and consists of actions aimed at achieving public and legal recognition of LGBT+ issues, as well as creating contexts for LGBT+ people. Social commitment is typical of older adulthood and characterized by a willingness to dedicate oneself to LGBT+ groups and allies, through collaboration and the sharing of personal experiences.

In the present study, political queer generativity was evidenced by participants' ( $n = 14$ ) engagement in *fighting for rights* (3a, Figure 1). Participants who engaged in this form of generativity considered activism an essential component of their identity:

I was forced by society to define myself as “gay” because it was clear that I couldn't do a series of things. So, when I realized that we were discriminated against, I became a gay activist and I went to the first congresses. Then it became more and more a commitment, it was an instrument to find the strength to be myself. (66-Year-old activist gay man)

This aspect often intersected with participants' sense of being a pioneer in the LGBT+ movement, driven to create and find places in an institutional vacuum:

My generation is almost that of the pioneers. I followed the history of the community step by step with my awareness. When I was young, there were no pictures of gay men, there was no pornography. As well, there were no [LGBT+] organizations. (63-Year-old activist seropositive gay man)

The activist subdimension highlighted gender differences in participants' experiences. Notably, women who participated in the research experienced double oppression—as both women and lesbians/bisexuals—which led them to embrace a feminist discourse combining gender and sexual orientation into a unique political and personal path:

We—the older lesbians—have followed a feminist path, which really means being together, communicating, and talking about our relationships with our mothers. We have watched certain films, read certain books and we understand the difference between needing and loving. (67-Year-old single lesbian woman)

An additional form of political generativity concerned *creating contexts* (3b, Figure 1) such as places, organizations, and cultural events for the LGBT+ community. We attributed this subdimension to only those participants ( $n = 8$ ) who explicitly reported having founded national or local LGBT+ and/or AIDS-related organizations, cultural festivals (e.g., the Torino gay film festival) and events (e.g., gay tango classes):

I did important things in my life: I founded XXX [LGBT+ activist center] in the '80s and I'm happy because it still exists and it's still a very lively place, with youth, women, trans people, who contribute a lot of new energy and ideas. I can say we did and changed many things, with the costumes, the ideas... Let's say, it is a good legacy. (67-Year-old activist seropositive gay man)

For some participants, this subdimension also manifested in planning for their future. Indeed, some participants were part of an Italian organization aimed at creating cohousing for the LGBT+ ageing population, which is not otherwise available in Italy:

When we talk about gay people, we often refer to gay youth. On the contrary, gay people grow old, and frequently, they have no children or grandchildren—they have no one to assist them. We are the first LGB aging generation, and, in my opinion, the LGBT+ organizations are not yet capable of addressing this issue. (63-Year-old activist gay man without children)

We would like to create cohousing in Italy following the Berlin model—that is, a series of apartments in which residents can live in absolute dignity, with 24-hour assistance for older people who are no longer self-sufficient and everything supported by a symbolic lease, therefore quite accessible. (60-Year-old activist gay man in a stable relationship without children)

Participants who had experienced oppression due to their sexual minority status tended to be sensitive to other forms of oppression, as well, thus embracing an intersectional perspective and addressing generative actions to benefit other stigmatized social groups:

I think that our trans brothers and sisters are the ones who have been mistreated the most and never understood by the whole LGBT+ community. Therefore, in the fourth part of my life, I would like to dedicate myself to them. (67-Year-old activist gay man, doctor)

The above extract explains the close link between the political and social aspects of queer generativity. Indeed, social generativity in older age may represent an attempt at maintaining the continuity of previous political acts, through

behaviours that are more characteristic of older adulthood. For instance, many participants ( $n = 11$ ) engaged in social generativity by *transmitting knowledge and experience* to others (3c, Figure 1), often through the formal activity of teaching LGB youth:

I mainly deal with faith and homosexuality by teaching in different groups. I think it is fundamental to contribute a historical memory, from a political point of view, because they [youth] missed a part of the history. The point is that the homosexual world—especially the world of gay men—is often discriminatory: when you are over 50 years old you are seen as an old used man who is no longer needed. On the contrary, I think that a 70- or 80-year-old person can contribute a lot, like a grandparents' worth. (68-Year-old Baptist Protestant gay man in a stable relationship without children)

I'm conducting a training course, completely free of charge, addressed to specialists [psychotherapists and physicians] who are interested in understanding LGBT+ people. Because I think there is a need to increase knowledge and competence on this topic. (68-Year-old gay man, psychotherapist)

In addition, some participants provided informal support to other groups, such as LGB parents, to help them recognize their children's experiences, thus indirectly help LGB youth to reconcile with their family:

I am part of an LGB parents organization because I thought that I could be a useful voice to help them understand and to know things that they haven't directly experienced. To help them imagine that their children can grow and move forward. (69-Year-old gay man)

Finally, some participants transmitted experiences to younger generations by creating video material (e.g., documentaries, film) and/or written sources (e.g., books):

At the time I had a camera, and then I started shooting a series of videos of us. Now I find myself presenting them to bookstores, organizations, etc. I made in total three films, three books, and got many recognitions. (75-Year-old activist lesbian woman)

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The present findings indicate that queer generativity is an integral part of the LGB ageing process. The generative behaviours of sexual minorities differ from those of the cis/heterosexual population because they are linked to a need to create a shared queer culture and recognize and strengthen one's oppressed status. For this reason, we referred to queer generativity (Oswald & Masciadrelli, 2008) as a series of behaviours performed by resilient LGB older adults (Landes, Ardelt, Vaillant, & Waldinger, 2014), aimed at improving their own and other LGB people's life conditions and increasing their comfort with their sexual identity. Like other marginalized groups (e.g., people with disabilities), LGB youth experience a lack of continuity with their parents in at least one fundamental aspect of their identity, as they are not heterosexual. Consequently, they are more likely to look for role models outside their families by identifying with other LGB adults or peers. Therefore, LGB generative people may represent a point of reference for other LGB people, regardless of their age. In these terms, queer generativity not only refers to an impulse of guiding next generations (social sub-dimension) but also to an impulse to take care of other potentially isolated people (relational sub-dimension), and to create a supportive context for the future (political sub-dimension).

Taking a CGT approach, we conducted the data analysis and literature research simultaneously, focusing on generativity as the key theme (Charmaz, 2014). Our findings fit well with the theoretical framework proposed by

Kotre (1984), who expanded the concept of generativity through the identification of four major types, characterizing the entire life course. Kotre's first two types, pertaining to the biological and educational aspects of parenting, respectively, correspond to our definition of personal queer generativity. Kotre's third and fourth types, pertaining to technical and cultural generativity, respectively, are highly consistent with our dimension of political and social queer generativity, and align particularly with our findings on the tendency of older LGB persons to transmit knowledge to younger generations.

Moreover, relational queer generativity and political/social queer generativity reflect the concept of *communal* and *agentic generativity*, respectively. Indeed, communal generativity refers to a willingness to care for other people and establish meaningful bonds, whereas agentic generativity aims at strengthening and expanding one's self through creative and powerful actions. By combining Kotre's theory with the concept of queer generativity identified by Oswald and Masciadrelli (2008), the current study described how the general aspects of generativity are specifically enacted by the LGB ageing population. In particular, the findings showed that queer generativity may manifest at personal, relational, and political and social levels, and that not all generative people enact all forms of generativity.

Nevertheless, personal queer generativity can be considered a central element in other forms of generativity, since, by giving value to one's own life experiences, an individual may feel more inclined to extend generative activities to others (Villar, 2012). The participants in the present study had redefined their values and beliefs to strengthen their sexual minority identity. Their ability to receive generativity by accessing cultural resources that had been bequeathed to them by older LGB people represented an integral process along this path, as it allowed them to redress sexual stigma and its consequences, such as isolation and the internalization of negative attitudes towards the self (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009).

Another important dimension of personal generativity consisted in redefining one's religious values, to positively combine these with one's LGB identity in a renewed sense of self. Indeed, in LGB people, the relationship between one's religious tradition and one's sexual identity has been found to severely affect well-being (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015). This may be particularly true for the Italian context, where Catholicism is pervasive and embedded in people's lives (Baiocco et al., 2018; Nardelli, Baiocco, Tanzilli, & Lingiardi, 2020). In the present study, some participants chose to distance themselves from religious contexts, whereas others actively sought open-minded religious environments. This process of reconciliation enabled the participants to develop generative religious practices aimed at defending sexual minorities from religion as a structural form of stigma (Bower et al., 2019; Oswald & Masciadrelli, 2008).

In a similar manner, participants who were parents had to integrate new parenting skills, such as coming out as LGB to their children (Lynch & Murray, 2000) and protecting their children from the stigma they might experience due to their parent's sexual orientation (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004). This subdimension, which we labelled *adjusting parenting*, was not linked to the biological aspect of procreation—which, in all but one case, had taken place in a prior heterosexual marriage—but consisted in transmitting to the children particular values, in accordance with the parent's sexual identity (Ioverno et al., 2018). The overall dimension of personal queer generativity can be conceptualized as a development path characterized by the redefinition of personal values (aimed at achieving a harmonious sense of self), followed by the transmission of these redefined values to others, to provide support and protection from stigma.

Relational queer generativity emerged as a community strategy to counter stigma and isolation due to one's sexual minority status, and it was generally demonstrated through the acts of caring for other LGB people and creating families based on chosen, rather than blood, ties (Roseborough, 2003; Weston, 1991). Participants enacted traditional roles (e.g., caregiver) in relation to unconventional subjects (e.g., a seropositive partner/friend), with the aim of both caring for someone close to them and protecting that person from stigma. As a result, they developed strong support and care networks involving LGB friends and experts, which counterbalanced any obstacles they encountered (e.g., discrimination, lack of knowledge, and limited access to healthcare services; Bishop, Mallory, Gessner, Frost, & Russell, 2020; Coon, 2003; Rosati et al., 2020).

Relational queer generativity was also evidenced by participants' willingness to offer resources that were both tangible (e.g., money) and intangible (e.g., time and skills) to others. As has been previously shown, LGB people's generative actions often consist in dedicating time to volunteering, pursuing a career that is helpful to the LGBT+ community, and regularly donating to LGBT+ causes (Bower et al., 2019; Cohler, Hostetler, & Boxer, 1998; Cornett & Hudson, 1987; Oswald & Masciadrelli, 2008; Roseborough, 2003). Relational queer generative actions could represent a way of giving value (e.g., by caring for others and creating LGB networks) and continuity (e.g., by becoming an HIV+ counselor) to one's LGB identity, as well as functionally sublimating (e.g., by practicing as a pediatrician) the limitations related to having a sexual minority status.

The dimension of political and social queer generativity refers to activities aimed at creating, reinforcing, and maintaining space in society for the LGBT+ community (McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992). In the LGBT+ context, political and social generative behaviours seek to strengthen and improve the conditions of sexual minorities over the short and long term (Bower et al., 2019; Oswald & Masciadrelli, 2008). Such behaviours include: (a) *fighting for* (LGBT+) *rights*, which contributes to more inclusive policies; (b) *creating contexts* for LGBT+ people, which generates tangible spaces for LGBT+ people to meet and openly live their identity; and (c) *transmitting knowledge and experience*, which honors and maintains the history of the LGBT+ community, while simultaneously suggesting useful strategies for community members to face hardships and develop a positive LGBT+ identity (Petrocchi et al., 2020). Again, LGBT+ persons who document their existence through films and books may also contribute to creating a long-lasting shared queer culture that is passed on from one generation to another.

In the present study, participants reported that their previous political experiences contributed to their current social behaviours. While their activism narratives generally referred to past experiences, their social activities (e.g., transmitting knowledge) were presented as current commitments. This finding is consistent with the idea that different types of generativity correspond to different life stages, with middle adulthood mainly focused on planning and creating and older adulthood primarily characterized by narration (e.g., teaching and mentoring; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993; Snarey, 1993). Future studies should verify whether the different generative behaviours (e.g., personal, relational, and political/social) differ depending on age cohorts of LGBT+ people. For instance, the findings of this study suggest that: (a) personal generativity is typical of the early stage of identity development; (b) relational and political generativity are more common among young and middle adults; and (c) social generativity generally characterizes LGBT+ older adults.

To attempt achieving a wider understanding of the role of generativity in the life of LGBT+ people and its positive impact on the ageing process, it might be useful to draw from Erikson's stages of psychological development model (Erikson, 1959). In this model, generativity is presented as stage 7 of the life cycle, characterized by the adults' will to contribute to the world by being active in home and community; in opposition to stagnation, that is the sense of being unproductive and uninvolved in the world. Successfully experiencing generativity in this stage of the life cycle is pivotal to attain integrity in stage 8, reflecting back on life events with a sense of fulfillment and wisdom. On the opposite, failing to take part in the generative process might result in a sense of despair in stage 8, looking back to the past with regret and bitterness. Those who experience integrity can feel satisfied and peacefully face the end of life; those who experience despair might regret their lives and get stuck in the anguish of death.

This approach can be adapted to LGBT+ people by extending and partially revising the current theories of the life cycle, such as the theory of Erikson, by considering the specific challenges and resilience strategies characterizing the development of sexual minorities identities. The findings of this study showed that LGB people may experience generativity in different ways compared to heterosexual people because a salient part of their life path consists of recognizing, adapting, and giving value to their sexual identity (Oswald & Masciadrelli, 2008). To achieve generativity is fundamental to be inserted in supportive contexts that can encourage community resources access. For this reason, we considered queer generativity as strongly connected to the concept of community resilience, as it creates the conditions for producing and transmitting positive norms and values, role models, and social support networks among sexual minorities (Meyer, 2015; Rollè, Giardino, Calderara, Gerino, & Brustia, 2018). Thanks to queer

generative actions, LGBT+ people use their minority condition to be active and give meaning to their lives, thus thriving in the face of adversities (Masten, 2007). Community resilience includes tangible—for example, LGBT+ centers, clinics, support groups, affirmative laws, and policies—and intangible—the redefinition of norms, values, and life goals from a minority perspective—resources that, as our findings showed, are made possible by generative LGBT+ people who engaged in the creation of such resources.

## 5.1 | Limitations and directions for future research

Some limitations of the present study must be considered. First, most participants were White, well-educated, and socio-economically advantaged, and shared history of queer activism. Nevertheless, this is a common recruitment bias in the field of LGB ageing, which must be considered when interpreting and generalizing the results (McParland & Camic, 2016). Second, many experiences related to queer generativity were more frequently reported by gay male participants, highlighting potential gender differences. In a similar vein, lesbian and bisexual older women shared history of greater invisibility due to their double oppression as both women and sexual minorities; this often resulted in different political and personal paths, compared to the gay and bisexual men.

As indicated by Oswald and Masciadrelli (2008), lesbians and gay men occupy distinct social spaces, with the latter more engaged in the public scene. Issues around visibility and intersectionality of oppressed identities clearly emerge from this research: Gay men in this research were White cis men, thus incorporating some sufficient privilege to have more opportunities (compared to lesbian and bisexual women in this case) to be part of communities and to speak out about struggles, conditions, and stigma they had to face over their life-course, thus resulting in more likely to experience and report generative actions.

Moreover, Edelstein (1997) argued that the construct of generativity fails to represent the experiences of women, who—contrary to men—generally dedicate many years to caring for others and may shift, in the second half of life, towards a greater focus on the self. Finally, despite the LGBT+ community may represent a fundamental physical and symbolic space for sexual minority people to strengthen their feelings of belonging, recognition, and identity affirmation, it is essential to critically consider the existence of sub-communities (e.g., gay men, lesbians, transgender, etc.) rather than a unique community able to represent all the different subjectivities. Future investigations should consider the complex intersection between gender and sexual orientation, as well as other important subjectivities, such as transgender and non-binary persons, to better describe the differences between relevant sub-groups in terms of queer generativity.

## 5.2 | Implications for policy and community practice

The present study aimed at highlighting the life stories of LGB older adults as a social group that is highly at risk of being rejected and isolated from both the general population (due to heterosexism) and the LGBT+ community (due to ageism). Participants perceived that Italian LGBT+ organizations were resistant to making ageing a key aspect of their agendas. However, their narratives concerning generativity demonstrated the fundamental contribution that LGB older people offer to the LGBT+ community and highlighted the positive outcome of community engagement in improving their quality of life.

For these reasons, we strongly recommend that Italian LGBT+ organizations become more inclusive of LGB older adults, by supporting ageing issues (e.g., implementing cohousing projects to provide a welcoming social environment) and facilitating LGB older adults in their role as mentors seeking to honor and communicate the history of LGBT+ movements and empower younger LGB persons, particularly in heterosexist social contexts. Importantly, institutions should implement health and social policies to create a safe social environment for LGBT+ older adults.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

Ageing must be considered an emerging challenge for sexual minority individuals and communities. We identified queer generativity as a resilience factor that is developed by LGB older adults to cope with heterosexist and ageist social contexts. In particular, queer generativity may enable LGB older adults to cope with: their lack of legal recognition and protection from homophobic harassment and discrimination, the invisibility of their LGB subjectivities and relationships in many institutions, their lack of both traditional family ties and religious support, and their shortage of positive LGB models (Meyer, 2015). Queer generativity is a community-based resilience strategy, characterized by a virtuous mechanism whereby LGB older adults lay the groundwork for the next generations to act in a generative manner.

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### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data Available on request from the authors.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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