



# Youth Perception of Extramarital and Homosexual Unions in North Macedonia

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## Abstract

Families and married couples in contemporary societies are constantly facing changes and adjustments to the impact of the processes of urbanization, globalization, individualization, and continuous technological development. Current statistics in North Macedonia show an increase in divorce rates, a decrease in the number of marriages, lower birth rates, as well as an increase in the number of extramarital and homosexual unions. Young people are increasingly disinterested in marriage and instead prefer extramarital or informal partnerships. In the past decades, these trends have been present, especially among the young population. This study aims to present the results of a comparative study carried out during 2014 and 2022. The general study compounds youth perception of marriage, divorce, family life, parenthood, and relationships in North Macedonia. More precisely, this paper will present the data related to the perception of young people in relation to extramarital and homosexual unions in North Macedonia, and through a comparative analysis of the two surveys we will aim to explore whether there is a change in the perceptions of different generations of students in the abovementioned research period.

**Keywords:** families, marriage, extramarital union, homosexual union, youth perception.

## **1. Introduction**

In the last few decades, the family unit has undergone under significant transformations regarding its structure, models, roles and functions. The dilemma of "the crisis of the modern family?" is increasingly present in the literature and academic debates. In addition to this dilemma, on the one hand, statistical data indicates continuous reduced number of marriages, increased number of divorces, reduced birth rate, low fertility, increased number of children born out of wedlock, etc. On the other hand, we live through a phase of change in the value system and the very concept of family, in which individuality has been strengthened at the expense of the collective model of happiness. The changes that occur within families affect individuals, but also the whole society. Under the influence of globalization, and the contemporary and dynamic way of life, those changes are expected to be even more intense. In this context, it is a general assumption that young people are forerunners of change, therefore, we consider it necessary to examine their perceptions and attitudes about family, marriage, parenting and relationships. In that way, we aim to get a clearer picture of the upcoming trends regarding family life, which is important for the creation of new demographic policies and family support policies in general.

The young population has a wide range of beliefs, desires and attitudes about valuing intimate relationships, the institution of marriage, and the qualification of relationships in marriage and about their own position in a possible (extra) marital union, the desired number of children, parenting and roles in the family. Some of these perceptions are inspired by the content presented in the media and on social networks, and others are mirrored by tradition and experience in the extended family. There is a growing recognition that young people's perceptions of marriage and informal partnerships are complex and multifaceted, and are shaped by a range of social, cultural, and economic factors that vary across time and place (Giddens, 1992; Manning & Smock, 1999). Further research is needed to better understand these dynamics and inform efforts to promote healthy and equitable relationships among young people. That is why we consider that it is necessary to investigate what those beliefs and attitudes are, whether they are based on previous understandings of family patterns and whether there is an evolution of perceptions among several generations of young people.

In North Macedonia, the number of marriages in the past years has been slightly decreasing, couples are increasingly delaying birth, and the birth rate in the country has decreased considerably, although the numbers are not as low as those from the European Union countries. In addition to statistical indicators, the perception of marriage and married life in our country is not at all negative. Namely, according to a research on the attitudes of young people in North Macedonia, the desire to have children is high and equal to that of building a successful career (4.5 on an arithmetic scale from 1 to 5) when it comes to values important to young people, and the desire to get married is also indicated as a significant value (4.3) in relation to other values related to, for example, healthy eating (4.3), good looks (4.2), sports (4.1), etc. (Topuzovska Latkovic M. et al., 2019, p. 42).

Hence, this research entails a comparative analysis of students' perceptions of family and family life in 2014 and students' perceptions in 2020. The main research questions relate to current family patterns; the desire to get married, the willingness to compromise and understanding of married life; desired number of children and understanding of parenting; the acceptance of divorce, cohabitation and same-sex unions. More specifically, this paper will present the data related to the perception of young people in relation to cohabitation and

homosexual communities in North Macedonia and through a comparative analysis of the two surveys we will aim to explore whether there is a change in the perceptions of different generations of students in the abovementioned research period.

## **2. Cohabitation**

Extramarital unions can be classified as cohabitation of unmarried heterosexual or homosexual couples who live together and are in an intimate relationship. These unions saw an increase during the 1970s especially in the United States and Western Europe. The emergence of individualistic societies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the increasing number of divorces, the acceptance of sexual relations before marriage, single parenthood, etc. are considered to be the reason for the increased acceptance of extramarital unions. An extramarital union is almost no different from a married one, apart from the official wedding ceremony and legalization of the marriage, as well as certain legal regulations that differ from country to country. Both marital and non-marital unions imply cohabitation of the partners and their children, intimate relations between the partners, running a joint household and shared economic resources of the partners, division of labor in the home and monogamy, i.e. sexual exclusivity between the partners (Ponzetti, 2003, Vol. 1, p. 315).

Some characteristics that distinguish marital and extramarital union are: younger age of the partners (very often extramarital union precedes marital union); longevity of the union (generally married union is still longer than extramarital union); fertility (usually with the arrival of children, partners move into a marital union that is perceived as a more stable union); legal regulations related to the inheritance of partners and choices in cases of illness (Ponzetti, 2003, Vol. 1, p. 316).

The development of extramarital unions in the countries of Western and Northern Europe could be summarized in several stages:

1. First stage: in the 1960s, extramarital union is a rare phenomenon and the majority of couples enter into marriage without having previously lived together. In this period, cohabitation is not yet socially accepted and marriage is the norm in the regulation of partnership relations.
2. Second phase: in the 1970s, begins the acceptance of extramarital unions it represents an occasional or experimental phase, that is, a type of premarital union.
3. Third phase: cohabitation is socially accepted, it represents an alternative to marriage and aims at its legal institutionalization. On this issue, each country has its own legal regulations, which usually refer to the rights to pension and inheritance after the death of one of the partners, the status of illegitimate children, the rights to alimony after separation, the rights to legal decisions in case of serious illnesses, surgery, etc. (Nazio, 2008, p. 3).

Young people's attitudes towards marriage have been changing in recent years, with many expressing a desire for more flexibility and autonomy in their romantic relationships (Cohen & Manning, 2010). Research has found that young people are increasingly delaying marriage and instead choosing to cohabit or engage in other forms of informal partnership, such as long-term dating or "living apart together" arrangements (Mernitz et al., 2018). But it be different from one to another society. As Giddens mentioned (1992) attitudes towards informal partnerships vary across cultures and regions, with some societies placing a greater emphasis on marriage as the preferred form of long-term commitment, while others are more accepting of alternative

arrangements. Cohabitation in North Macedonia is considered to be an almost exclusively urban phenomenon and is not sufficiently accepted in rural areas, where stigma, social and family pressure to marry are still pronounced. According to the stages of the acceptance or spread of extramarital unions, North Macedonia is in the second phase, that is, the period when the extramarital union actually represents more of a premarital union or a prelude to marriage. According to a qualitative research from 2017 of young couples aged 25 to 45 from North Macedonia, cohabitation is increasingly represented in our country, it is socially accepted and especially popular among young couples because, on the one hand, it simultaneously offers the benefits of marriage and the benefits of pre-marital life, and on the other hand can develop into a marital union at any time. However, young people from North Macedonia still prefer marriage over cohabitation and usually choose parenthood only after they are married (Авировиќ, 2017). According to another qualitative research from North Macedonia from 2019 on the attitudes of different generations towards new family models (cohabitation, multi-ethnic families and homosexual unions), cohabitation was accepted by the majority of young people (from 20 to 35 years old), whilst adults (from 40 to 65 years old) had a rather positive attitude towards it, although they preferred the married unions (Авировиќ Бундалевска, 2020). Other studies have found that young people's attitudes towards informal partnerships are influenced by a range of factors, including their personal beliefs and values, their exposure to diverse relationship models, and their socio-economic status (Mernitz et al., 2018; Manning & Smock, 1999).

### **3. Homosexual unions**

Same sex couples have faced stigma, prejudice and discrimination over the course of history. Although today some countries recognize these unions and allow same sex marriages, as well adoption of children by same sex couples, the majority of legal systems worldwide do not recognize nor protect same sex unions (Ponzetti, 2003, Vol. 2, p. 720).

Cultural norms and values around sexuality and relationships can shape young people's attitudes and beliefs, as can political and legal frameworks that impact the rights and recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals and non-traditional family structures (Yarhouse, 2015).

In general, the Balkans tend to be more conservative in their attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships compared to many other European countries. This is partly due to the influence of traditional cultural and religious values, as well as political and legal factors. For example, many Balkan countries still have laws that criminalize homosexual acts or limit the rights of LGBT individuals, and anti-gay violence and discrimination are not uncommon.

Studies on young people's attitudes towards homosexual unions in the Balkans are limited, but existing research suggests that there is a significant amount of prejudice and discrimination towards LGBT individuals. For example, a study conducted in Serbia (Petrović, N. (2014) found that over 60% of respondents believed that homosexuality was a disease, while another study in Bosnia and Herzegovina found that almost 90% of respondents did not approve of same-sex marriage (Tijanić, L., & Bajraktarević, A. 2016). However, there are also indications that attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships may be changing among younger generations. A survey conducted in Croatia in 2018 found that over 60% of young people aged 18-29 believed that same-sex couples should have the right to marry (Delić, M.,

& Štulhofer, A. 2013) while a study in Bulgaria found that younger respondents were more likely to support LGBT rights compared to older respondents (Daskalova, S. 2016). Overall, while attitudes towards homosexual unions in the Balkans remain complex and varied, according to Human rights watch (2019) there are some indications that younger generations may be more accepting of LGBT individuals and relationships compared to older generations. However, much work remains to be done to address the ongoing prejudice and discrimination faced by the LGBT community in the region.

Homosexual communities or communities whose partners are of the same sex do not have the right to formal marriage in North Macedonia, at the same time these communities are subject to discrimination and are not fully accepted in our modern society and there are no official data on their number. The first country in Europe to legalize same-sex marriage was the Netherlands in 2001, followed by 28 other countries in the world, with different rights regarding the adoption of children (Oinonen, 2008). In order to increase the rights and visibility of members of the LGBT community, in 2019 the first pride parade "Pride Skopje" was held in North Macedonia, which received great support from activists in the region, foreign ambassadors and politicians, but due to the risk of incidents, it was carried out by police security, and at the same time a parallel march for the preservation of traditional values was held. Previous research (Mitchell, Fries, 2016) indicate that homophobia is present in more religious and traditional societies and older people as opposed to young people (АвиРОВИЌ БУНДАЛЕВСКА, 2020).

In a qualitative research from 2019 on the perception of new family models by two different generations in North Macedonia, including homosexual communities, it was recorded that the majority of older respondents (aged 45-60 years) do not support these communities, mostly for religious reasons or their natural inability of reproduction. Many respondents, in addition to not supporting these communities, condemn them. On the same matter, the majority of young respondents (aged 20-35 years) do not accept homosexual unions, mostly due to the fact that in same-sex unions the reproductive function cannot be performed, but also in the case of adopting children, they expressed a negative attitude (АвиРОВИЌ БУНДАЛЕВСКА, 2020).

## **4. Research: Youth perceptions of extramarital and homosexual unions in North Macedonia**

### **4.1. Research methods and sample description**

The subjects of our general research are the perceptions of young people from North Macedonia regarding marriage, cohabitation, same-sex unions, divorce, parenthood. and intimate relationships. Apart from the examination of current perceptions and attitudes of students from our country, the research is also a comparative study that examines the changes in the perceptions of young people over a period of 7 years. The comparative analysis, which is made by comparison with the same research conducted in 2014 (with an identical questionnaire and on the same quantum of sample), examines the dynamics regarding the perception of marriage, (extra)marital unions, divorce and parental role.

The specific subjects of our general research can be sublimed as follows:

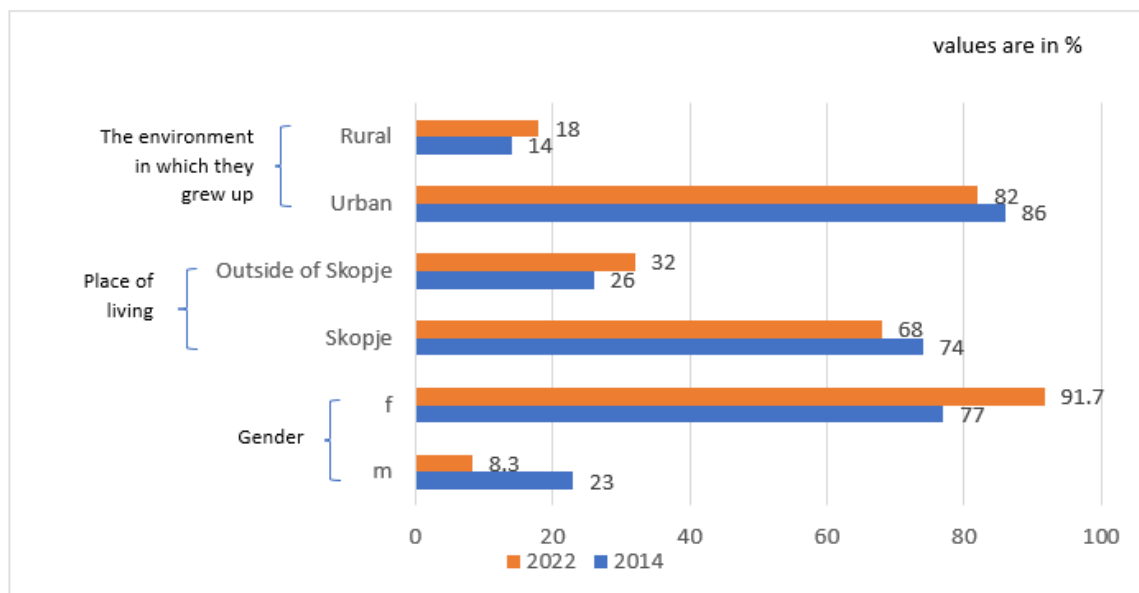
- To examine the perceptions of young people in relation to their own family, that is, the family of origin;
- To examine the perceptions of young people regarding sexuality;
- To examine the perceptions of young people regarding marriage;
- To examine the perceptions of young people regarding divorce;
- To examine the perceptions of young people regarding the extramarital union;
- To examine the perceptions of young people regarding parenting.

In this paper, more specifically, we will present the detailed results of youth perceptions on cohabitation and same-sex unions in North Macedonia. We used as a *research instrument* a questionnaire with a total of 52 questions divided into five sectors: general data, marriage, divorce, children and cohabitation.

### Sample description

Provided that this is a *comparative study*, the research was carried out on two samples. One sample refers to the research carried out in 2014, while the other sample of the research was carried out during 2022. In both cases, we achieved a convenient sample, obtained through the snowball method. The difference in the two samples is in the method of data collection. The research in 2014 was carried out through the distribution of questionnaires, while in 2022 the research was carried out online through the Google Forms platform. In both samples, due to easy availability, the target group were students, mostly from the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje. The sample in 2014 counted 120 respondents ( $N_{2014}=120$ ), while in 2022 it counted 121 respondents ( $N_{2022}=121$ ). We have a better overview of the sample in the following charts:

Chart 1: Overview of the samples in terms of gender and place of residence

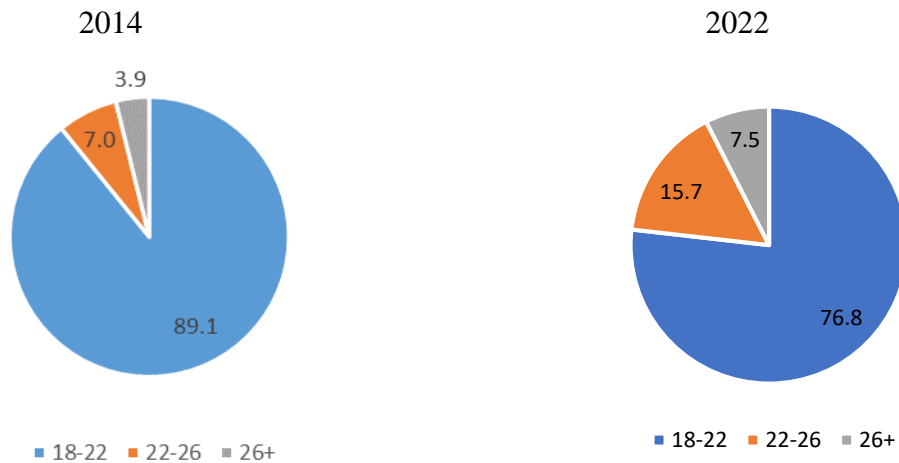


On chart no.1, we can see that in 2014, 77% of respondents were women, in comparison to 23% male respondents. The largest part of them, i.e. 74%, live in the capital Skopje, while 26% respondents live outside of Skopje. Furthermore, the majority of the sample, 86%, grew up in an urban environment.

The 2022 sample contains significantly more female respondents 91.7%, compared to 8.3 male respondents. Most of the respondents live in Skopje (68%), compared to 32% who live outside of Skopje. Similar to the 2014 sample, 82% percent grew up in an urban environment.

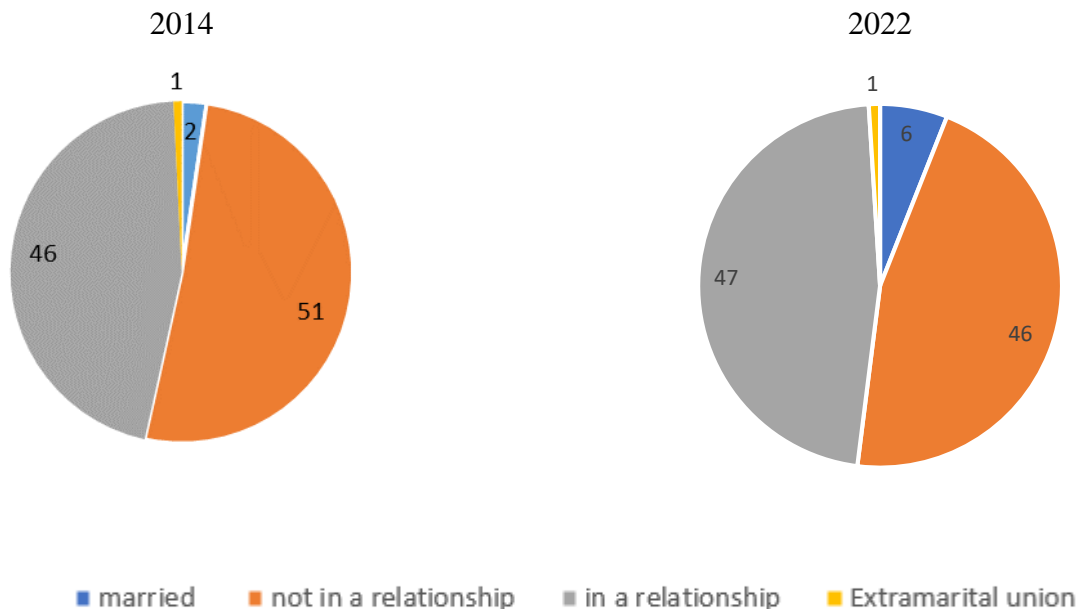
In terms of age, in both samples the majority of respondents are aged 18-22.

Chart 2: Age of respondents (values are in %)



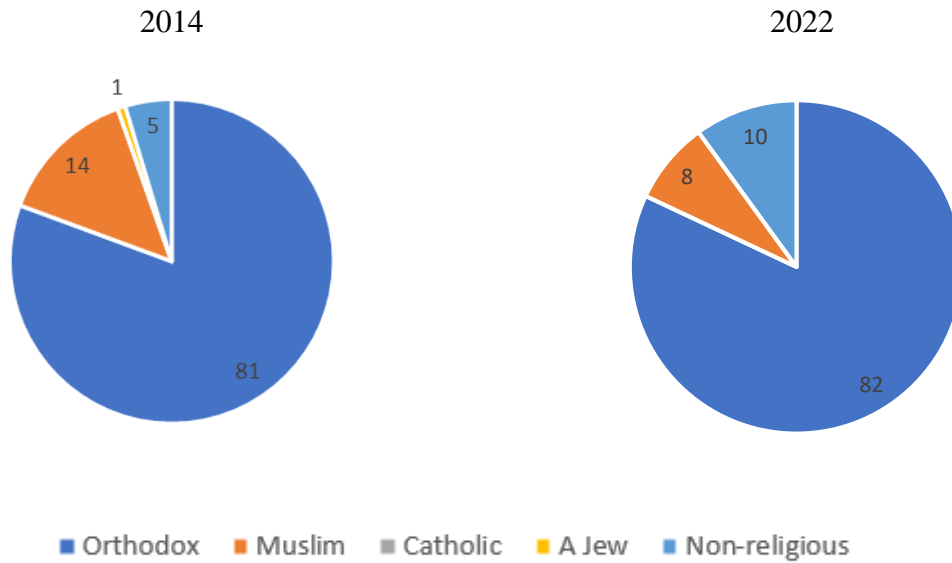
In terms of their marital status, the distribution is almost equal between young people who are single or in a relationship, both in 2014, as well as in 2022. The distribution of the percentage representation is presented in chart no. 3.

Chart 3: Marital status (values are in %)



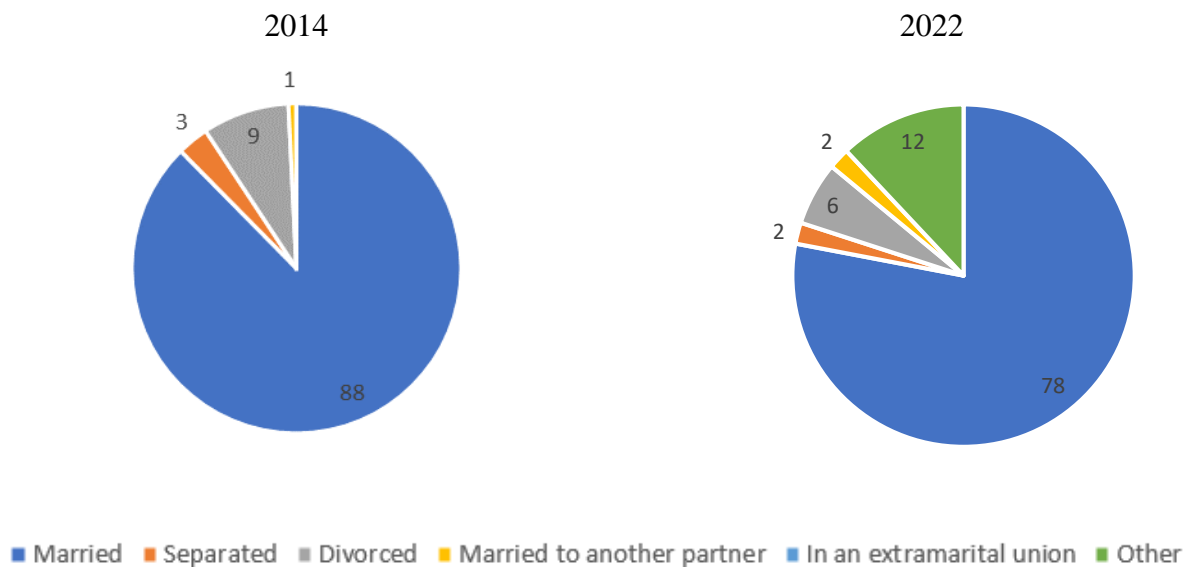
In terms of religious affiliation, the majority of respondents are Christians, in N<sub>2014</sub> the percentage representation of young Christians is 81%, compared to 82% in N<sub>2022</sub>. The results are presented in more detail in chart no. 4.

Chart 4: Religious Affiliation (values are in %)



The majority of young people come from nuclear families and married parents, respectively 88% in 2014 and 78% in 2022. The percentage of parents who are separated or divorced is similar. In 2022, 12% of respondents opted for the option ‘Other’, which mostly includes parents with a deceased partner. Research has suggested that young people who come from more stable and supportive family backgrounds are more likely to have positive attitudes towards marriage and long-term commitment, while those from more disadvantaged backgrounds may be more likely to view informal partnerships as a viable alternative (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Mernitz et al., 2018).

Chart 5: Marital status of the respondents' parents (values are in %)



Finally, since we are researching homosexual unions in this study, we considered it important to ask our respondents about their sexual orientation. Regarding the latter, we noticed a major difference over the years in comparison to the other questions presented previously. In fact, in 2014, 95% identified as heterosexual, compared to 86% in 2022. The remaining



percentage of respondents declared themselves equally as homosexual and as bisexual. The results are presented in the following charts.

Chart 6: Sexual orientation of respondents (values are in %)

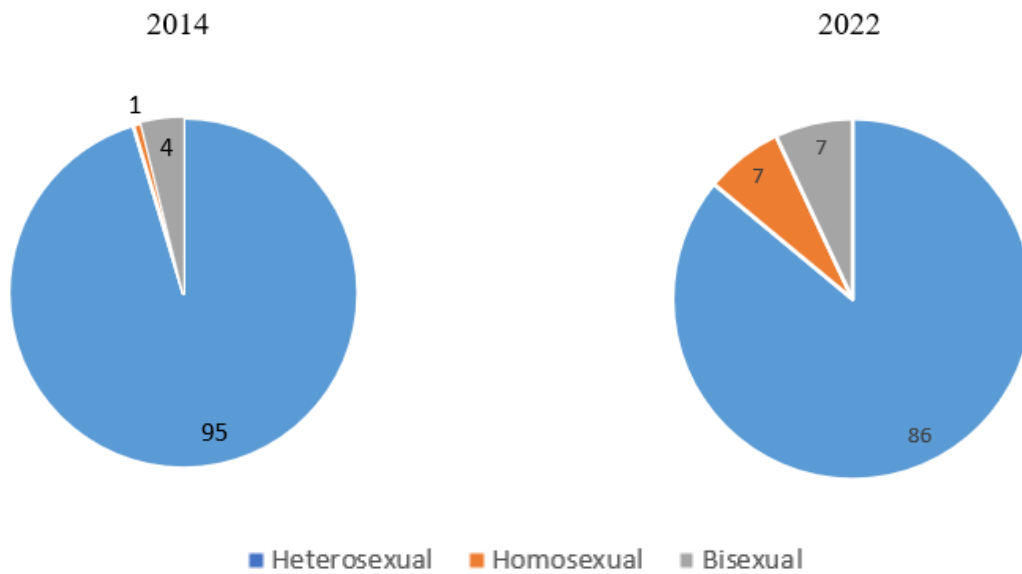
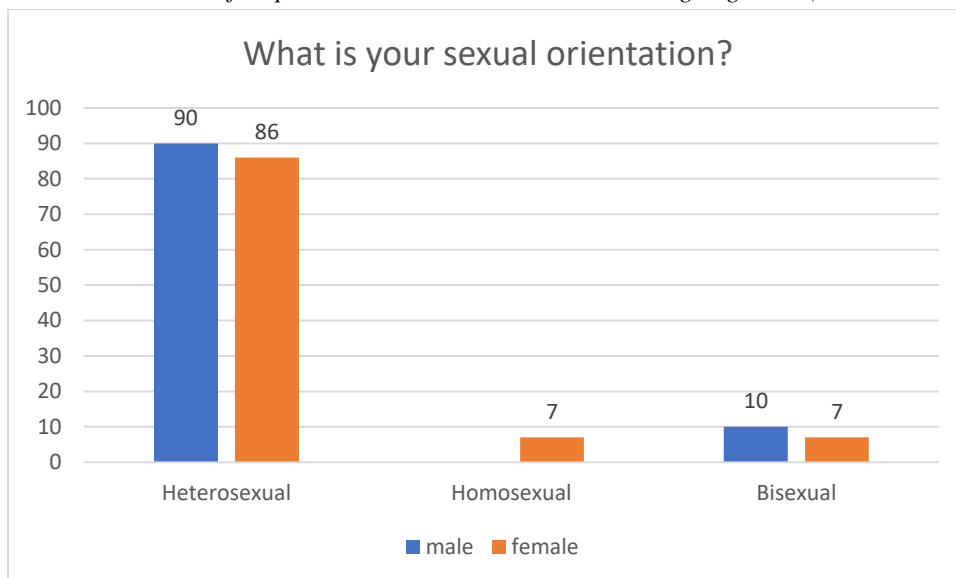


Chart 7: Distribution of respondents' sexual orientation according to gender (values are in %)



### Statistical Data Processing

The collected data were grouped and tabulated in order to facilitate further processing. In processing the obtained data, we used the percentage representation and the  $X^2$  test at a significance level of  $p < 0.05$ .

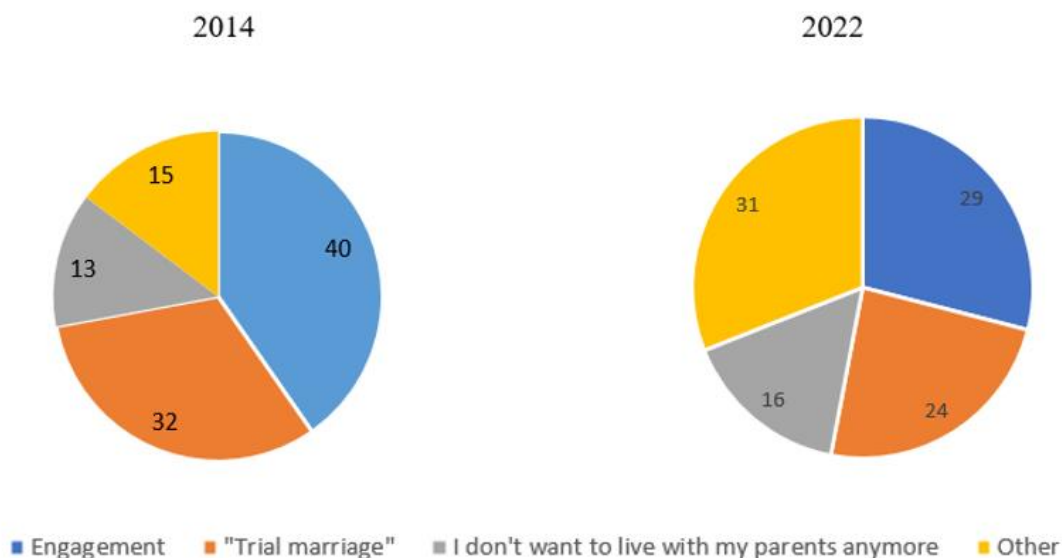
## 4.2. Analysis and interpretation of the results: youth perception on extramarital and homosexual unions

Regarding the youth perception on cohabitation, according to our data analysis, we determined that the majority of them would like to live in an extramarital union (61%), but they consider that living in an extramarital union is still morally unacceptable in North Macedonia (78%). Analogous to this results, 52% of young people do not believe that their parents would approve of living in an extramarital union i.e. cohabit with their partner.

The majority of respondents (53%) believe that living in an extramarital union can have a positive impact on marriage. In 2014, a higher percentage of respondents believed in the positive influence of cohabitation before marriage, as much as 65%, but the analysis with X<sup>2</sup> showed that the reduced percentage of trust is not statistically significant. A further higher percentage of respondents (68%) stated that they would not live with a partner who does not believe in marriage.

However, 29% of respondents who consider cohabitation acceptable, would be in an extramarital union only if engaged with the partner, or as a trial marriage (24%). However, in this regard, we can conclude that individual views of the respondents dominate this issue, and 31% of the respondents declared that would accept cohabitation under personal circumstances and choose the option ‘Other’ (chart 8).

Chart 8: Under what conditions would young people accept living in an extramarital union: (values are in %)



58% of the respondents (2022) agreed that it is acceptable for a woman to give birth to a child outside of a partnership union, which shows a certain change in relation to perceptions in 2014 when only 47% declared positive opinion on this matter. A high percentage of respondents believe that having children is not crucial for a happy marriage, 78% agreed with this statement.

Regarding same-sex marriages, we can conclude that young people are more willing to accept same-sex unions (61%), but that percentage decreases when it comes to accepting the legalization of same-sex marriages (53%). In contrast to the partial acceptance of same-sex

marriages, young people have a stricter attitude towards having/adopting children by same-sex partners, 65% declared that they do not agree with this.

The comparison with the research in 2014 showed us that certain attitudes have changed significantly in relation to today's understandings, but some of them have remained unchanged or changed very little (Table 2 shows the values of  $X^2$ , and those values that have been statistically determined are underlined significant difference). According to the results, we would point out that perceptions have changed significantly in two segments: living in an extramarital union and same-sex marriages/unions. Young people now, unlike in 2014, are ready to live in an extramarital unions. While regarding same-sex couples, we would point out that there is a significant liberalization of attitudes, young people showed greater acceptance of these unions and their legalization. Despite the fact that the majority of respondents believe that same-sex partners should not have children, this attitude was far more rigorous and represented by a significantly larger number of respondents in 2014. That is, the attitude on this issue is gradually changing among young people. Detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Presentation of the attitudes of young people regarding extramarital and homosexual unions in North Macedonia

Statements / Questions	I agree				I do not agree				$X^2$ P<.05
	2014		2022		2014		2022		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Would you live in an extramarital union?	48	40	74	61	72	60	47	39	<u><math>X^2(1, N=241)=10,78</math></u> <u><math>P=0,001021</math></u>
Cohabitation is morally accepted in North Macedonia.	37	31	27	22	83	69	94	78	$X^2(1, N=241)=2,42$ $P=0,134307$
Cohabitation leads to a successful marriage.	78	65	64	53	42	35	57	47	$X^2(1, N=241)=3,64$ $P=0,056106$
Would your parents agree if you decided to cohabit with your partner in an extramarital union?	61	51	58	48	59	49	63	52	$X^2(1, N=241)=0,2$ $P=0,652605$
Would you live with a partner that does not believe in marriage?	32	27	39	32	88	73	82	68	$X^2(1, N=241)=0,89$ $P=0,34338$
It is acceptable for a woman to have children outside marriage.	56	47	70	58	64	53	51	42	$X^2(1, N=241)=3,02$ $P=0,082192$
A couple without children can be a happy family.	80	67	94	78	40	33	27	22	$X^2(1, N=241)=3,64$ $P=0,056247$
Do you accept homosexual unions?	48	40	74	61	72	60	47	39	<u><math>X^2(1, N=241)=10,78</math></u> <u><math>P=0,001021</math></u>
Same-sex marriages should be legalized.	43	36	64	53	77	65	57	47	<u><math>X^2(1, N=241)=7,10</math></u> <u><math>P=0,007697</math></u>
Homosexual partners should have the right to adopt children.	31	26	42	35	89	74	79	65	<u><math>X^2(1, N=241)=2,24</math></u> <u><math>P=0,013373</math></u>

## **5. Conclusion**

This research aimed to give a broader picture of the perception of young people about marriage, extramarital and homosexual unions, divorce and family. In particular, in this paper we presented the results regarding students' attitudes towards cohabitation and same-sex couples. In the last decades in North Macedonia the number of marriages is decreasing and marriage is no longer necessary for the accomplishment of the reproductive and economic function. Young people tend to marry later or exchange marriage for cohabitation. Extramarital union, today, are socially, legally and morally accepted. As mentioned in (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Mernitz et al., 2018) our research also shows that young people who come from more stable and supportive family backgrounds are more likely to have positive attitudes towards marriage and long-term commitment. This is not the case for the homosexual unions which still face a certain degree of stigma and prejudice in our country. We can agree with the discussion in the report of Human rights watch and state that much work remains to be done to address the ongoing prejudice and discrimination faced by the LGBT community in the region.

The number of studies that offer new insights and data on the abovementioned topics in North Macedonia is relatively small and the number of researches covering young people is even smaller. For us as researchers, it was crucial to examine the thoughts and perceptions of young people, because, as we stated in the introduction, they are the creators of future trends and are a population that in the future should form a family, get married and have offspring. To obtain comparative data, we first conducted the survey in 2014, and then repeated it in 2022. We consider that the period of 7 years, in the conditions of globalization, rapid technological development and intense influence of social media, is a long enough period to notice changes in the attitudes of young people about marital, extramarital and homosexual unions, divorce and family life.

We consider that marriage continues to be an important goal for young people, as shown by previous surveys, where marriage was rated high on the scale of values. However, marriage is not seen as the main prerequisite for happiness and contentment by youth in North Macedonia. The romantic idea of marriage and married life is present, and love continues to be the main reason for getting married and is the most important for maintaining a happy marriage. Responsibility in marriage is rated as the least important. Young people in North Macedonia have no preparation before getting married, so the dilemma arises as to how realistic their expectations of married life are. There is a more pronounced individuality of young people who do not consider marriage as mandatory, are not ready to make compromises in terms of career and community life or lose their identity in marriage. There is an overcoming of traditional perceptions that marriage is forever and an easier acceptance of extramarital union and divorce, as well as partners who have already been in another marriage or have children from the same one.

Extramarital union is accepted by young people, and similarly to other surveys from 2017, 2019 and 2020, young people prefer it as a premarital union or a "trial" marriage. The opinions of young people that it is morally unacceptable in our society and that their parents would not agree to them living in an extramarital union shows that prejudices are still present when it comes to cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. There is also greater freedom and experimentation with sexuality, and the number of bisexuals and homosexuals in North Macedonia is growing. There is also a greater acceptance and approval of homosexual communities and their possible future legalization.

We can agree with (Giddens, 1992; Manning & Smock, 1999) that there is a growing recognition that young people's perceptions of marriage and informal partnerships are complex and multifaceted, and are shaped by a range of social, cultural, and economic factors that vary across time and place. Further research is needed to better understand these dynamics and inform efforts to promote healthy and equitable relationships among young people. Our next step would be deeper qualitative study on the same research questions.

In general, it can be concluded that in recent years certain attitudes have changed significantly, others partially, and some have remained the same. The research period of 7 years may not be enough to significantly feel differences and deviations in the attitudes of young people. However, we can definitely state that there are movements in the direction of abandoning tradition, liberalizing perceptions and modernizing the family and family life in North Macedonia.

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